

“GOOD GRAVY, DAVY”

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THIS IS ONE OF A SERIES OF ARTICLES BY ROISUM ON INDUSTRIAL PROBLEM SOLVING.

“**G**OOD GRAVY, DAVY, OPEN YOUR EYES,” SAID MY father on more than a few occasions. In fact, he said it so often and at the most embarrassing times that I grew to resent the remark. It would usually be precipitated by something like leaving the water on, not closing a door open, or forgetting to put something away. But, you know, he was right. There are many reasons why we don’t see what is in front of us.

1. Our minds may be preoccupied or otherwise engaged. While there is nothing wrong with this *per se*, our senses should not shut down just because we are thinking about what we are going to do this weekend or say at an upcoming meeting. Preoccupation causes us to miss information, some of which may be vital to our well being. Mills and converting plants are full of hazards, such as forklifts, cranes, and nips that require our full attention. One solution here is simple: attend to only one thing at a time.

2. We may not appreciate just how much we miss. Our ability to observe and recall—or lack thereof—was clearly demonstrated to me last fall. I was involved in a multi-car pileup precipitated by a tourist who stopped in the middle of a busy highway for a mother duck and her ducklings. Though I came to a safe stop, the person behind me was distracted and did not. There was a seventh driver who took paint from two other cars, but did not even stop to apologize. Though all of the drivers and several passengers clearly saw the hit-and-run, none could recall details about the car except its approximate size and color. One solution here is to critique a situation afterward and ask what information might have been useful.

3. Sometimes the visual signal is not strong enough to register. I am amused when, for example, my wife will leave a small Christmas decoration behind for months without seeing it, even though it is in plain view. However, I am just as guilty, as I have gotten separated from

her in a crowd and had to scratch my head as to what she was wearing so that I could look for a color. In the plant we look at a web that is not perfectly flat, but may not see the wet streak, bagginess, or precursors of wrinkling until they near rejectable levels. Similarly, small ridges and valleys in a wound roll are ignored, even though they also provide important insights into the physics of the process. One solution here is to take the time to focus on the details. Be patient and look for ever finer details.

4. Sometimes we may be so overwhelmed with information that we fail to focus on the most important. Consider what happens when we visit a customer’s or supplier’s site. We typically try to remember the names of our hosts and key points they make. But what about the prominent labels on the machinery, raw material and product, or the postings on the bulletin board? One solution here is to make a list beforehand of what you need most, and think about ways in which you might be able to get that information.

5. We are not trained to observe. When is the last time you read an article, or took a short course on paying attention? Police officers receive training so they can become better observers and more accurately and completely recall the details of a crime scene. Technical people, however, are just expected to have this talent or to acquire it on their own.

The good news is that we can become better observers. One simple solution is practice. An exercise that can help is to walk through a new room, and then recall as many details as you can after leaving or an hour later.

Since my job puts me in many plants every year, I have had much opportunity for practice. Now, I almost never leave the water running. I owe it all to my dad. TJ

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