

LATENT EMBARRASSMENT

Imagine losing control of a fully loaded dumper going down a steep slope. This recently happened to Steven, the operator of a Volvo dumper in a quarry. He crashed into a sidewall and the vehicle sustained damage of R1m. Fortunately Steven was unscathed.



The initial diagnosis was that the vehicle was overloaded. But when a more comprehensive Root Cause Analysis investigation was undertaken, other interesting information emerged. For example, a mechanic had been called out to check the brakes a few hours before the accident. He could smell that the brakes had been overheating. But when he tested them, they seemed to be working satisfactorily. If the vehicle had been taken out of service there and then the reason for the overheating brakes investigated, R1m could have been saved.

But there was more! Data from the on-board computer showed that there was minimal use of the retard and engine brakes. The service brake was used more than 90% of the time; this is the opposite of how the brakes should be utilised. Below is a portion of the "why analysis" done by the investigating team.

Bob Nelms defines latent cause as the deficiencies in the management systems or the management approaches that allows the human errors to continue unchecked. The problem when we get to realising what the latent causes are, is that it becomes embarrassing, like the one above was.

Nobody likes to be embarrassed, which is why we often don't pursue our analysis to sufficient depth. But if we really want to benefit from Root Cause Analysis, we would do well to treat the embarrassment as motivation for continuous improvement.

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