



Greg Howell warned me: “do not try this at home.” In fact, he’s reprising that verse this week at the Lean Facility Lifecycle 2012 Conference in Tampa-St. Pete. His keynote is called “Lean Construction: There’s no turning back.” That was my feeling as I was sitting in 17B (that’s right, in the middle) on a leg of the journey from D.C. to San Francisco last week. I was on my way to welcome Hathaway Dinwiddie into the corporate member ranks of the LCI. This 100 year old firm is the latest to realize the importance and impact of lean principles in the industry, so welcome aboard.

But as I was sitting there, waiting to take off and listening to the Flight Attendants go through their routine, I was once again astounded at how many people completely disregard the “turn your electronics equipment all the way to off.” In my 200 plus thousand miles that I’ve flown since signing on with LCI some 15 months ago, the “turn the power to off” speech has bewildered me. It is a rule, as Blackstone might have said “more observed in the breach than the observance.” When I’m upgraded to First Class, it’s even more prevalent. I have yet to see a single person (other than myself, of course) in First Class turn off their electronic equipment. Why is it that we consistently violate that rule? What is it about prescriptive rules that bother us?

I did a deep dive into that this week—just because I felt that I needed to know why. First I looked at rules in general. There are two definite, opposing viewpoints. There is this from Albert Einstein: “You have to learn the rules of the game. And then you have to play better than anyone else.” This is the “rules” structure—and science is bounded by rules. You throw something in the air, the rule is that gravity brings it back down. We have lots of scientists/engineers in our community that believe that there are process rules in what we do and that those rules must be followed to get the desired end result. Then there is the contra: “I believe in rules. Sure I do. If there weren’t any rules, how could you break them?” Thus said Leo Durocher, the irascible ex-manager of the Chicago Cubs and other baseball teams. But Marilyn Monroe shared his view: “If I’d observed all the rules, I’d never have got anywhere.” We have folks in our community that break rules to see what happens—that challenge the common practice. Since “common practice is the enemy of common sense,” there is a rational basis to the late Ms. Monroe’s observations. If we always push scheduled, we would “never have got anywhere [sic].”

What’s the truth about the rule? Is there a rule about rules? An immutable principle of the universe? Is there a danger in keeping your cell phone power on, even if it’s on airplane mode? If there is a danger, why do they let you turn it on to get onto GoGo.com? If there is no danger, why do they continue to have the rule? If you’d like to explore that, visit <http://abcnews.go.com/Blotter/safe-cellphone-plane/story?id=13791569>. It features the reasons for and against the rule—you’ll find out it’s not a Federal Aviation Administration rule but a Federal Communications Commission rule. You’ll also find out that the best reason for



the rule is to keep airplanes from turning into “yelluar” space. Seasoned passengers, even those that don’t turn off their phones, believe that the rule should remain intact to keep the miscellaneous yack-attacks to a minimum. (If you’ve travelled on Amtrak, they have a quiet car for the same reason)

I thought this rule could teach us something about our community. When the risks that rules are meant to mitigate aren’t fully understood or fully appreciated, it’s easy to disregard the rule. Think of safety rules. We can easily understand the risks in the photo on the left, but what of the photo on the right? What are the safety concerns there? What are the risks meant to be mitigated by the rules?



Is safety just a checklist, an announcement made at the beginning of the flight, or is it a set of rules that are closely related to our human instincts to self-protection and concern for others? Is it better to have a rule that we belt ourselves on scaffolding or would we be more likely to belt ourselves on scaffolding if the rule was that we carry a picture of our children on our hardhats to remember why we want to go home in one piece?

How about a rule that we make a written record of every RFI, even though the RFI is in writing already? And the written record of the RFI is sent to every person in a hierarchical list so that we know we have notified everyone of the RFI? How about a rule that if a pay request on one job from a sub-contractor is late, we suspend payment to that subcontractor on every one of our jobs to make sure we don’t overpay the sub based on a late submission of a pay request? Or the rule that every member of our Integrated Team attend every meeting in the Big Room because they might be needed to discuss a subject that arises? Or the rule that we must have a payment bond on every governmental contract, regardless of the risk of failure or default?

Don’t do this at home. It begins to make you question the rules. And we just can’t have that, can we? Can we? Bueller? Anybody?

Don’t try this at home. Once you do, “there is no turning back.”

Have a safe and valuable week my friends. Thanks for all you do.