

WHO MURDERED MRP ?

AN INDUSTRIAL MYSTERY

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The events are TRUE. The names have been changed to protect the innocent.

Episode Two: The Capacity Smoothing Clue

"If Mr. Manu Facturing killed MRP, who killed Mr. P. Body?"

Miss Purr Chasing's parting words bounced around my head like the chrome plated orbs in a pinball machine. I kept pounding the flipper buttons, but no bells were ringing and the line of goose eggs on the scoreboard stretched to infinity.

This much I knew - Manu Facturing was in on it. He may have looked like a nerd, but he was an *MRP Man* right down the line. It was his kind of system. If he knew how to use it, he also knew how to abuse it. That's exactly what he did when he borrowed capacity from future weeks just to keep running at full capacity. But was that enough to finger him alone as the killer? And, was a straightforward case of borrowed capacity the only misdeed that had snarled up ACME's MRP system? I didn't think so.

I shook myself out of daydream mode and back to reality. I was dying for a smoke, but none of the modern day manager class I'd encountered so far sanctioned the evil weed. Intent upon bumming a blower and checking out my latest hunch, I ventured down onto the factory floor.

I found the Foreman right where he should have been - leaning on a railing in a cloud of smoke watching widgets wind their way along the production line. With an eye cocked for the anti-smoking police, I tried my opening gambit. "Ya got a gag ya can spare?"

The Foreman's response was as predictable as *pawn to king four*. He gave me a Senior Service and a light, but he didn't say boo to a goose. We stood in pregnant silence - puffing. I tried my secondary gambit. "Nasty business."

The Foreman took his time. It wasn't his clock that was running, it was mine. "Yeah," he wheezed back eventually. "We'll all miss him. P. Body was a good man."

"That too," I said. "But I was thinking more about MRP. Somebody's really stuck the knife into that as well."

"Good riddance," said the Foreman. "I'm not a spiteful man, but I've been running things on this floor for twenty years. If you ask me, MRP is more trouble than it's worth."

"How so," I asked, hoping he might take the line and run with it. He did.

"Ha! Mr. Prod Uction sits up there, high and mighty in his office, pumping numbers into his computer. Then he scampers down onto the floor with something called a capacity plan. Well, I haven't got time for it. My job's not paperwork. It's machines. I know more about them than Prod Uction and Manu Facturing put together." He was red in the face and huffing as he lit up another dead-end.

I could see his point. But I figured if MRP was going to work the capacity plan it produced had to be adhered to. If it wasn't, MRP would choke to death on its own paper output. You might call it an accident, but it could also be murder.

"Tell me," I said, "How often does Prod Uction run MRP?"

The Foreman grunted his disgust. "Too often, if you ask me. Every week. And that's only the start of it. There's also the

revisions. In fact, I had a revised capacity plan come down to me from his Lordship the night ol' P. Body copped it."

As a trained investigator, I know when to keep my trap shut. Now that I had the lid off the tin, I wasn't about to put it back until all the worms were out. I leaned back to listen.

"It started innocent as heck," the Foreman began, "with an unexpected breakdown of the 12 Ton Yoko Widget Press." The Foreman's story took me deep into the murky nether world of the capacity planner. There was no punch line. There never is when the game is murder and the weapon is a clear-cut case of capacity smoothing. I only needed two more things from the Foreman - another smoke and an answer to my last question. "Aside from you and P Body, who else was in the factory the night he was killed?"

His answer was about as surprising as a pre-election tax cut. Like the proverbial bloodhound after the elusive fox, I climbed the steel stairs to his lair. Stencilled on the office door, his name and his title were synonymous: Mr. Prod Uction.

"The MD told me to expect you, Mr. Sultant," he said, proffering a hand that was as limp and cold as yesterday's spaghetti. Here was a neat, grey man cocooned in a neat grey, office. A sudden feeling of overwhelming ennui washed over me like the tide gone mad in a lunar eclipse. If I told you he was boring, they'd take away my poetic licence.

"Earl Grey," he offered, gesturing to an ancient *Teasmade* on a filing cabinet. I yawned instinctively and then it clicked. I'd been down this road once before - years ago. Remember Christy? He had a *Teasmade* as well.

Maybe boring wasn't the worst of it.

"I expect you want to ask me about the untimely demise of our Mr. P. Body," he mused.

I did, but I had other things on my mind. Like a dentist with a diamond drill, I went straight for the nerve. "What can you tell me about the breakdown of 12 Ton Yoko Widget Press?"

Either he was a darn good liar or he didn't have a clue what I was talking about. He completely denied any knowledge of the breakdown, even though his Foreman had just told me the Yoko had been shut down for repairs for almost three hours. If I was going to get anywhere with this guy I was going to have to reef in and change tack completely. "OK., Mr. Prod Uction. If you didn't know about the breakdown, how come you issued a Revised Capacity Plan on the very night Mr. Peabody was murdered?"

Cool as a cucumber would be an understatement. Like he was on the witness stand and I was the prosecuting attorney, Prod Uction showed no implication of guilt. His answer was exactly what he said it was: "Standard procedure." I could see the jury now. Throwing out the case and my evidence in the same dishwater. They'd believe his every, boring word.

"My latest statistics showed that production on the 12 Ton Yoko had gone into backlog. When I input that data into MRP to produce the capacity plan for the upcoming week, I got a plan that was grossly overloaded. My solution was to manually adjust the capacity plan, taking into account the backlog by delaying customer orders."

I jerked to attention. It was exactly what I wanted to hear - the first nail going into his coffin. I had to see the MD. I thanked him for his time and headed for the Boardroom.

The MD got straight to the point. "Have you found the killer, Mr. Sultant?"

"Not so fast," I said. "Tell me what you know about capacity planning charts."

"Not a great deal," answered the MD. "Capacity planning and its various elements - materials explosions, gross and net requirement and the like, are really the responsibility of Mr. Prod Uction. He's the planning specialist - on paper of course. His planning decisions are then passed on to the Foreman for execution."

I'd seen it all before. "That's the usual division of responsibility. But what happens if there's a breakdown?"

"A mechanical breakdown," he asked.

Just as I suspected. He hadn't heard either. The hammer was in my hand now. I was about to bang down the coffin lid. "Or, a communications breakdown," I said. "Either would have been bad enough on its own. Only you've had both. Now your MRP system is dead in the water."

He looked like he'd seen a ghost. His own. "Please elaborate, Mr. Sultant," he said.

"OK Here's the chronology. The 12 Ton Yoko Press breaks down. What does the Foreman do? He calls in a mechanic to repair it. Only three hours of down time. No big deal - he thinks. Does he tell Mr. Prod Uction? No. Can Prod Uction tell MRP about the breakdown before its next run? No. So what does MRP spew out?"

The MD was no MRP expert. He didn't have to be. "The capacity plan for the 12 Ton Yoko would have been overloaded."

"Roger. But, here's the hitch. Prod Uction 'aint stupid. Even though he doesn't know the reason for it - the breakdown, that is - he sees production is backed up. He knows instinctively his capacity plan needs smoothing."

"Doesn't MRP automatically provide the solution," asked the MD.

"It doesn't. And it can't. After all, MRP's only a tool. You pump rubbish in, it spits rubbish out."

"Prod Uction's revised capacity plan!" exclaimed the MD. "So, that's why MRP's had the life kicked out of it."

"Only partly," I continued. "MRP was the victim of a double edged sword. On the one hand, you have Prod Uction. All he cares about is a balanced production schedule. When the Yoko goes into backlog and MRP says capacity's overloaded, he's desperate to save his coveted *balanced production schedule*. So what does he do?" I cut the air with my imaginary scimitar: "He fiddles the capacity plan."

"A manual adjustment," declared the MD, recovering from my thrust.

Again, I swung my sword. "And: To make matters worse, the Foreman ignores the revised capacity plan. He knows more about the machinery's potential than either Prod Uction or MRP. He knows he can overcome the time lost by the breakdown and catch up on the backlog. He tools up the 9 Ton Brit Press with a 3/4 Collet Adapter and widgets are falling off the line like crazy."

The MD had the ball now and he was heading for the goal. "If only he'd told Mr. Prod Uction. That important tooling

data would have been input into MRP. The capacity problem that MRP showed up on paper would have been resolved. And, just as important, Mr. Prod Uction wouldn't have wasted his own time working out a manual capacity plan." The MD was shaking with excitement. "But, why didn't that happen?"

They never see the obvious. That's why I still have a job. "It's *jargonese*. Lack of communication between the ivory tower and the foxhole. First: The Foreman won't talk to Prod Uction 'cause he doesn't trust paperwork and he doesn't trust MRP. The Foreman's gotta understand the value of MRP and the difference his input can make to its output. Second: Up there in his ivory tower, Prod Uction's gotta admit that he doesn't know everything. He's an important player on the team, but so's the Foreman on the floor."

Once the penny drops, they always think they're detectives. The MD was no different. "So, it was Mr. Prod Uction that killed MRP!" he declared. "And he was in the factory on the night Mr. P. Body was murdered." I stopped him in his tracks before he could jump to any more conclusions.

"Yeah. Prod Uction was in on it, all right. But, remember *The Borrowed Capacity Clue*. That one put the finger on Manu Facturing. So far, I've only got hearsay testimony. If I'm really going to nail the MRP killer, I need hard evidence."

That meant Data. To get it, I'd have to turn *Cat Burglar!*

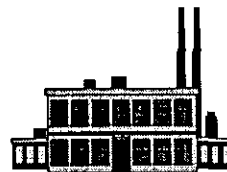
Next Episode:

"THE CLUE OF THE LONG TIME AGO ORDER"



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