

The Three Wrong Answers

To the question: what is the job of a maintenance manager? Three answers are seductive and wrong. One is simple and right. Keep this on the wall. Drift happens quietly.

Companion to: *Fix the System*, Chapter 2. **Where to use it:** tack above your desk. Read it before every quarterly review. Re-read it after any budget conversation.

Wrong Answer 1 — The Dashboard

The claim: *The job of the maintenance manager is to move the dashboard. Pick a KPI. Manage against the number.*

The tell: You find yourself pre-rehearsing the KPI narrative before the monthly review. You know by Thursday what you will say on Tuesday. The number is the point.

Why it feels right: Numbers are legible. Executives respond to them. A rising line feels like progress.

How it destroys the program:

- Every KPI measures *activity*, not *output*. You can move PM compliance from 78 to 93 by shortening task lists and lowering standards. The number moves. Nothing improves.
- Gaming is easier than improving. Any determined manager can hit any KPI in a quarter without changing the underlying work.
- The manager becomes a monitor of the KPI, not a builder of the capability. A year of watching the line go up does not build a better shop.

The reframe: *The KPI is the thermometer. The job is the weather.*

Wrong Answer 2 — The Cost-Cutter

The claim: *Maintenance is a cost center. The job of the maintenance manager is to bring the cost down.*

The tell: Finance asks the first question at every review. The quarterly goal is a dollar number. The word *capacity* does not appear in the conversation.

Why it feels right: Cost is a number. Finance speaks that number fluently. Cutting cost looks like discipline.

How it destroys the program:

- Maintenance spend and maintenance capability move in opposite directions in the short run. You can cut 30% in a quarter by deferring PMs, stretching contracts, canceling CBM, and freezing training. The plant does not fail that quarter.
- Eighteen months later, cost of failed equipment, emergency response, expedited parts, and production losses exceeds the savings by 3x to 10x.
- The manager who made the savings is usually promoted or gone. The next manager inherits the wreckage and is told *maintenance is out of control*.

The reframe: *Cost is a constraint. Capacity is the measure. Ask how much maintenance capacity we are paying for and not receiving — not how much we are overspending.*

Wrong Answer 3 — Motivation

The claim: *If the crew cared more, if the supervisors set the tone, if the technicians took ownership, the numbers would follow.*

The tell: When performance slips, the conversation turns to who is not pulling their weight. Usually a specific person. Sometimes the previous manager.

Why it feels right: Culture is real. You have seen culture turn plants around. Leadership language is the vocabulary the training industry speaks.

How it destroys the program:

- Culture is an outcome of the system, not a substitute for it. You cannot motivate a crew into doing planned work when the planning process is broken. You cannot ask a technician to own a close-out form that asks them three meaningless questions.
- The answer almost always points at individuals. Managers get replaced. New manager, same system, same decline.
- Good intentions coexist with poor outcomes for a very long time, especially in a shop full of capable people operating inside broken systems.

The reframe: *The system produces the behavior. If you want different behavior, install a different system. Culture follows structure.*

The One Right Answer

The job of a maintenance manager is to close the gap between the labor the plant is paying for and the maintenance work it is extracting.

That is it. One sentence.

The gap is measurable (wrench time, backlog aging, schedule compliance, close-out quality). The gap is produced by specific missing or broken systems. Each system, once installed, closes a specific share of the gap.

Three operational moves, in order:

1. **Measure the gap.** A number gives the program a scoreboard. Without numbers, the firefighter view of a good day wins every argument. 2. **Install systems that close the gap.** Palmer, Wireman, and Moubray wrote most of them down decades ago. Installation is a project, not a memo. Plan it in weeks, not days. 3. **Coach the people operating the systems.** Standards drift without enforcement. Audit weekly. Correct quickly and privately. Praise publicly when the system holds. The manager's role after installation shifts from engineer to coach.

Use this page

- **Every Monday:** read the three wrong answers. Ask yourself which one you argued for in the last week.
- **Every quarterly review prep:** before you walk into the room, re-read the reframes.
- **When someone else argues the wrong answer to you:** do not argue back in the moment. Send them this page. Let them come back.

*From Fix the System by Ivan Getov. Companion to Chapter 2: The Job, and Why Most Plants Get It Wrong.
getov.xyz/toolkit/fix-the-system/ch02/three-wrong-answers. Free. No email required.*