

If Your Only Tool Is A Hammer

Measure Twice, Cut Once – November 2021

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The “Measure Twice Cut Once” series looks at sayings that originated among woodworkers, and might just prove instructive elsewhere in life. Hence, the subtitle of the series is “Wisdom from the Shop.” This month’s essay is an exception, where a saying that appears to be about woodworking really came from someplace else. The saying is: “if the only tool you have is a hammer, everything looks like a nail.”

I was quite confident that this idea came from a carpenter or a woodworker. As often happens, though, I was wrong. Though there is some dispute over the first use of the phrase, in the U.S. the concept is well-known among psychologists as **Maslow’s hammer**, or the **law of the instrument**. Wikipedia tells us that it “is a cognitive bias that involves an over-reliance on a familiar tool.” Wikipedia also notes that “The English expression ‘a Birmingham screwdriver’, meaning a hammer, refers to the practice of using the one tool for all purposes.”

There’s a local angle for the EMGW, since Abraham Maslow taught Psychology at Brandeis University for many years. He’s better known for his hierarchy of human needs, but that’s a topic for a different essay. Like philosopher Abraham Kaplan, who wrote in 1964 “Give a small boy a hammer, and he will find that everything he encounters needs pounding,” Maslow observed the human tendency to perceive a problem through the lens of our most familiar instruments. Raise a problem of public well-being, and an economist might propose a pricing policy, a politician might suggest a new regulation, and a community organizer might arrange a rally. Do you have an unfamiliar ache? A personal trainer will recommend exercises, and an orthopedic surgeon might reach for a scalpel. Familiar tools actually shape and influence our mindset, and can erect boundaries in how we define a problem and where we search for solutions.

We tend to rely on solutions we have used before when confronting a new challenge. This can be efficient, but can also block innovation or adaptation to changing circumstances. Constantly re-inventing the wheel is wasteful, but in some situations a wheel is no use. We become fenced in by the tools we know best and use most often. When we speak of thinking outside of the box, perhaps we should imagine a toolbox and ask whether tools that we *don’t have* might provide a better solution.

I hardly need to suggest to woodworkers that a new tool is an appealing idea. Many of us would recoil in horror to even contemplate the prospect of opening a toolbox and only finding a hammer. But how often have we, in weaker moments, used a tool for an off-label purpose? More to the point, how often do we conceive of a shop task or solution in terms of a particular tool or favorite technique?

One of the most rewarding aspects of our EMGW sessions and Furniture Interest Group (FIG) gatherings is the meeting of the minds when someone presents a problem that is keeping them up at night. Each participant comes at it from a different angle, colored by their own set of tools and skills, and the divergent suggestions might lead to an outstanding solution that no one initially suggests. A brief group brainstorming exchange can generate a terrific answer.

And sometimes it can identify that new tool that you just *have* to buy.