

Commentary

One Way to Pick “Low-Hanging Fruit” Is To Chop the Tree Down!



Christopher C. Berndt

There is a phrase that has entered “management jargon” that defies a rationale explanation: yes ... “low-hanging fruit.” I am wondering whether others may be confused—is it good or bad, or desirable or undesirable, to pick low-hanging fruit?

First let me explain how this phrase has been interpreted in two environments: (a) for the manufacturing sector the phrase implies that firms produce the least expensive units first, (b) for the political sector the phrase

clarifies that the election season is the time to count people, not convert them to your party. Thus, in very general terms, low-hanging fruit is defined as “The easiest task or the most readily achievable goal.” (<http://www.wordspy.com/words/low-hangingfruit.asp>) An example from the Web that might resonate with some of us concerns parking violations. The low-hanging fruit that the traffic wardens pick in this situation are (a) illegally parked cars in residential areas during early-morning hours on Sundays, (b) expired inspection stickers, (c) cars faced the wrong way on dead-end streets, etc. The low-hanging fruit represent easy revenue in terms of traffic fines.

How about for thermal sprayers and technologists; what are the low-hanging fruit? Here is a very short list: attend an ITSC! Then carry the analogy a bit further; actually participating in an ITSC by presenting a paper allows you to pick more fruit because you gain so much more knowledge and understanding.

So far the discussion has been oriented to the classical management-speak that we have become accustomed to. Let me now explain why some low-hanging fruit are *not* desirable. In my own world of research there are a lot of very bright and aggressive people picking low-hanging fruit, as well as the rest of the tree until it is bare! Then the tree is

chopped down and nothing remains. It appears as if the R&D becomes derivative in order to satisfy a program manager or funding agent because they want results, as measured in the currency of presentations, publications, higher degrees, awards, etc., and they want these NOW. And you may well say, “What’s the problem here? These are tangible results that indicate accountability for those people spending our tax dollars!”

Here is the *fundamental problem* behind this skewed logic. For there to be fruit there needs to be a tree, and this tree needs to be of a completely different variety so that breakthroughs in science and engineering evolve over a time frame that is often longer than the tenure of a 3-year grant. In plain language, the low-hanging fruit philosophy precludes long-term research that will advance true innovation. Low-hanging fruit rule out the adage that “a person’s reach should exceed their grasp.”

If you have a contrary viewpoint then contact me; I am more than happy to help you shake the bushes and see what falls out!

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