

# The Dishwasher tray Metaphor - Operational Excellence blog series

Nicolas Avril – [Enging.net](https://enging.net) – Blog 09 – December 2024

It is sometimes believed that **Operational Excellence** happens without rules and effort because people prefer to achieve results with less effort, and because there is beauty in order. These reasons alone however cannot make your operations reach (or maintain) a world-class level of efficiency.

There was once a team developing a complex product. All members were aware that quality was a cornerstone of their work, that time was of the essence, and that collaboration between disciplines was key.

To allow greater focus on their industry changing activities, a dishwasher was purchased (with a dedicated cutlery tray). The dishwasher ran nightly. Regular reminders to place the dirty items in the dishwasher and not the sink were delivered on the general slack channel. It was working!



*Figure 1. A messy, lightly loaded dishwasher cutlery tray*

But as the company grew, new colleagues were added and, at some point efficiency was lost.

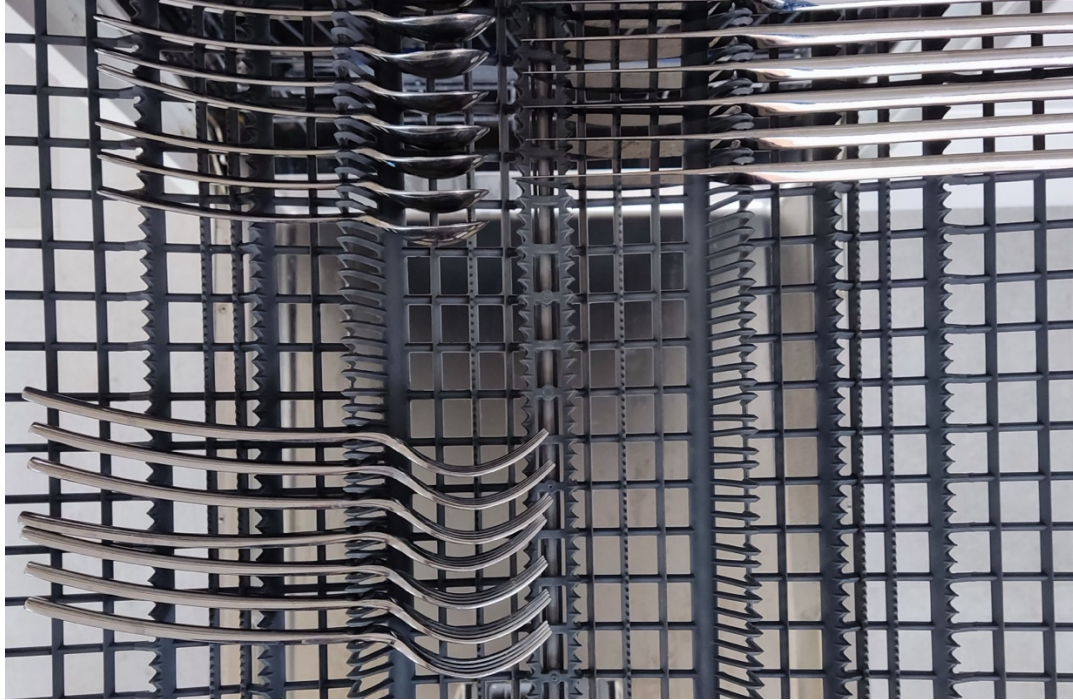


*Figure 2. A messy, loaded dishwasher cutlery tray*

Even though the same process was followed, and slack reminders were sent more frequently, it was taking increasingly longer to unload the dishwasher (exponentially longer).

While picking up all the spoons, knives and forks from the tray was easy at first, increasing the number of items without requiring some placement order lead to the need for multiple trips (in LEAN lingo, waste was created, namely waste of movement and overwork).

Requiring every item to be placed according to a predefined rule should have been requested to maintain (and even increase) the efficiency of the early days. The process (or the absence of process) that worked initially was no match for the natural increase in chaos that came are more people shared devices and storage space.



*Figure 3. A neatly loaded dishwasher cutlery tray*

**Rules are needed**, when teams are growing. This is true for simple tasks such as loading a dishwasher. It is also true in all other areas of your operations. Processes will need to be clarified and documented, file naming conventions will need to be adopted, and document storage locations will need to be defined. And yes, these new ways of working will need to be taught, learned, and adopted by all (including the early employees).

Defining the right type of rules and giving processes an appropriate visibility is what I help achieve as an Operational Excellence expert.

This is easy to understand, but like all changes, it takes commitment and dedication.

**Do you have designated resources accountable for it?** Should we talk?

Looking forward to hear how your experience relates to this!

Information and disclaimer: This article is based on the work I have delivered as manufacturing, operational excellence, and NPI advisor (at [Enging](#)) and as industrialization expert teacher ([S2Xpeed](#) accelerator).