

# **Writing an Operations Management Mystery Novel**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This paper describes a mystery novel written by the author. The novel puts an operations manager in the midst of a murder mystery and elements of operations management are integrated into the story. The purpose of this exercise is to entertain students while teaching them about how operations is essential to our daily lives.

## **INTRODUCTION**

The first successful attempt to demonstrate operations management principles within the context of a novel was “The Goal,” by Eli Goldratt and J. Cox. “The Goal” was a superb way to teach students and managers about the principles of scheduling around bottlenecks. Since the goal, no authors have managed to recreate that sort of success with a fictional technique.

To that end, this author wrote a mystery novel, “The Case of the Supply Chain Killer.” This mystery put an operations manager, Emerson Menzies, in the midst of a murder mystery. As the story unveils, a number of operations management techniques are illustrated. The purpose of “The Case of The Supply Chain Killer” was to entertain and enliven the learning experience for students. As they progress their way through the exploits of Emerson Menzies, they witness a number of principles that show how operations management is important to our daily work lives.

The following section is the opening of this novel.

## **THE CASE OF THE SUPPLY CHAIN KILLER**

Emerson Menzies knew his life had reached the crossroads. Emerson was the 28-year-old materials manager for L.A. Children's Hospital. Six years out of DePaul University, he had come to Hollywood with dreams of making it as an actor.

Like all aspiring actors, he had taken a job to support himself while he pursued his acting career. His job as a supply clerk at a small hospital had led to a job as a purchasing agent, and finally, a position as the materials manager. As far as his hospital management career was concerned, he was doing well.

But his acting career had floundered. In the six years in L.A., he had appeared in four television commercials and had several roles in local theatre. He did have an agent, who was semi-competent, and had auditioned for perhaps twenty commercials in which he was not hired. He had one speaking line as an office worker in an Adam Sandler movie. His total earnings in the six years of acting were under ten thousand dollars. Meanwhile, he was paid seventy thousand per year as the materials manager and for that it afforded him a fairly nice lifestyle for a single guy. His one pal in his life was his dog, a golden retriever he named B.A., which stood for Bad Attitude.

The reason Emerson found himself at the crossroads of life was that he was completely immersed in a planning committee for a new hospital. Since he was involved with purchasing, it meant he had to solicit bids for everything from new beds, to cribs, operating room lights, sterilization equipment – several million dollars of supplies and equipment. He saw his acting career coming to an end. Some nights, he imagined himself going to the hospital administrator and resigning to pursue his dream. Other nights, he gave up acting, got an MBA, and embraced his health care management career by climbing into administration and a six-figure income.

He hoped for one break in acting. Just one role that would pay him as much as he earned as a materials manager, so he could quit. Meanwhile, he knew he was just another one of those people who came to Hollywood with a dream, only to return home to Chicago with his tail between his legs. There were songs about guys like him. "I'm leaving, on that midnight train to Georgia," or "Do you know the way to San Jose."

His planning meeting was scheduled from 4 to 6, so he checked in with his assistant, Joe Estrada, prior to heading to the conference room.

"I'll probably be back after 6 or so, Joe, so I'll see you tomorrow."

"Okay," Joe said cheerfully. Joe, a 50-year-old Filipino always seemed happy even though he had been demoted from Emerson's boss to his assistant. He was a good employee, a hard worker who always made sure the storeroom was perfectly neat at the end of the day, and all the day's shipments had made it to their proper location.

Since then, Emerson had been promoted one more time, to materials manager, supervising twenty-five employees. His domain included the central supply area, purchasing, and the storeroom. When Emerson was promoted, the administrator refused to allow him to promote Joe, so another purchasing agent was hired, Terry Sakai.

Terry had one thing in common with Emerson. He aspired to be in the entertainment business, as a musician. He was in a rock band called the Measles. He was 24, a Japanese American and both parents played in the L.A. Philharmonic. He had been a buyer for a department store chain prior to getting the gig at the hospital. Since Emerson was a big music fan, he enjoyed sharing an office with Terry, discussing all

genres of music when they weren't conducting business. Terry's mission was to secure a recording contract for the Measles, who played in scummy bars in East L.A.

Emerson checked in with Terry one last time. "Anything going on before I head to the meeting?"

"No, should be a quiet day tomorrow. Nothing serious is back-ordered."

"Yeah. I've had enough of that for one lifetime! All right, off to the planning meeting."

Emerson physically attended the planning meeting, but his thoughts were elsewhere. He had auditioned for a commercial the day before and not yet heard from his agent on the result. It was a cereal commercial and all he did to audition was to sample the cereal, look at the camera, smile, and say, Now THAT's a JOY!" That was it. That was all he was told to do, as was customary in the business. But one commercial often led to several. A director might like you and hire you again. The pay was good. You never know. Could that job rescue him from a lifetime of purchasing hospital supplies?

He heard Mr. Rubin droning on and on, about the hospital mission, about increasing productivity, whatever, but all Emerson could do was daydream. Finally, the meeting ended and Emerson returned to his basement office to get his briefcase.

Emerson noticed his office door was still open and Terry's IPOD still shuffling through some songs. Terry never worked late. When someone in HR had told Terry that according to payroll, 4:53 was the same as 5:00, he clocked out every day at the same time, 7 minutes before 5. It was 6:19. And would he leave without his IPOD?

The storeroom was not locked, either, so this was not looking right. The rule was that the storeroom was always locked and secure if no one was around.

"Terry? You in there?"

Emerson walked through the storeroom, movable wire shelving that stored over a million dollars worth of X-Ray film, sutures, band aids, office supplies, and everything else that was needed to supply a hospital. Then, Emerson saw one thing that did not belong. He turned an aisle and there was Terry, hanging from a beam, a steel chain wrapped around his throat, his face blue and his eyes bulging. One of Terry's shoes was untied, and Emerson had a momentary urge to tie the shoe, but then, the shock of what he was looking at registered.

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The next morning, the two detectives awaited Emerson as he reached his desk, mug of coffee in his hand. The man was around 60, with a droopy face. If he were a dog, he definitely would have been a bloodhound. Tall, graying, and wearing a black leather jacket. There was an East coast air about his accent, Emerson thought correctly, since Hollister was from Philadelphia. Hollister combed his hair like Elvis, and probably had for 50 years.

After the preliminary greetings, Hollister scratched a neck irritated from the morning shave.

"We got some questions, OK?"

"Come on in."

Hollister's sidekick, Mitsi Mays, was in her late twenties, as attractive as a television cop. She was sandy blonde, with a sun-washed complexion that could only come from training for triathlons. She had a deeply tanned face, except around the eyes,

which were pale from the protection of her sports sunglasses. Hollister and Mays took a seat across from Emerson's desk. Emerson did a quick check of Mays' left hand. No ring. He didn't mind getting interviewed by Mitsi at all.

"OK, tell us about yesterday," Hollister began.

"Sure. I left the office at 4, came back after 6. When I saw that Terry left his IPOD, I thought he had to still be here, so I looked in the storeroom and found him. Then, when the police came, they found Joe Estrada dead in the receiving dock."

"Were Estrada and Taylor connected outside of work?" Hollister asked.

"Terry. No, not at all."

"And nothing is missing from the storeroom?"

"As soon as you leave, we're doing an inventory. But nothing is noticeable and we don't store any drugs here. That's all in the pharmacy."

"Let's take them one at a time," Mitsi asked her first question. "Did anyone have any reason to hurt Terry?"

"I don't know. Outside of work, I never hung out with him. He lived with his parents and he was in a band, the Measles that played maybe once or twice a month at some bars in East L.A. He played me a tape once. They weren't very good, but that doesn't give somebody a reason to kill him."

"Did he have a romantic involvement?" Hollister chimed in.

"He dated, but I don't know of any trouble."

"Money problems? Drugs?"

"I'm not sure what he did when he wasn't at work. He was a musician. That's all I know."

"Job history here?"

"A good worker."

"You got some performance evals?"

"Yeah. I'll show them to you."

"Did Sakai and Estrada get along?"

"Well, there was one incident."

"And?" Hollister paused eagerly.

"Terry was not clocking out, and would come back in a couple hours later to clock out. He'd get paid overtime. I didn't catch on, but Joe did. Joe told HR and I had to write Terry up for it."

"And did Terry resent Joe for it?"

"He didn't know it was Joe who told on him."

Mitsi Mays got up and sat at Terry's desk, going through the drawers.

"Anyone have a reason to hurt Joe?"

"He had a wife here and one in the Philippines. Maybe one of them. I never met his family. I just knew he had two of them. Maybe three, four kids in each one."

"We understand Joe used to be your boss."

"Yes, the administrator offered me his job on the condition I fire Joe, but I never did. I always expected Joe would find another job somewhere but he never did. We got along well, though."

"He didn't resent you for that?" Hollister asked.

"No. He hated Rubin, the administrator. But Joe's the dead one, not Rubin."

"How about Rubin? He has something against Joe?"

“He didn’t think Joe spoke English very well.”

Hollister stopped taking notes. “Did anybody see these guys after you went to the meeting?”

“Not as far as I know.”

“You mean to tell me nobody came down here for over an hour?”

“Quiet day. All the supplies are delivered in the morning. Sometimes they come down here if they need something, but they are pretty well supplied.”

“Let’s see the performance evaluations,” Mitsi asked.

Emerson pulled out a notebook from his desk drawer and handed it to Mitsi.

“Here are the productivity stats for both of them. You’ll have to go to HR for the evaluations, but I can tell you they were excellent.”

Mitsi leafed through the notebook, “Give me the bottom line. What are all these numbers?”

“You follow baseball?”

“That’s Hollister’s game.”

“Philly fan. Eagles. Sixers.”

“You must not be from around here,” Emerson joked.

“Cut the clowning. What about baseball?”

“Well, let’s take Terry’s job first. As a purchasing agent, he was required to find suppliers for our materials, to make sure we always had stuff in stock, and to minimize our costs. So, he would try to group as many supplies as he could on the same order to reduce the number of deliveries, the number of invoices, and so on. So, some of the statistics I have here for him, are purchase orders per month, dollar volume per month, inventory turnover rate, dollars of inventory, and the stock out rate all categorized by vendor.”

“And where does baseball come into it?”

“Only in that the statistics are similar to a baseball player’s batting average. They are productivity measurements, like sports statistics.”

Mitsi passed the binder to Hollister. “I see he had 15 inventory turnovers in March and 16 in April. Is that good or bad?”

“That depends. Usually, the higher the number, the better, so long as you reduce the stock outs at the same time.”

“Cut to the chase,” Hollister interrupted. “Is there anything suspicious in these numbers?”

“No. They are all good.”

“We’re taking this notebook.”

“Fine. Be my guest.”

“What do you have on Joe’s performance?” Mitsi asked.

“I measured his job by number of shipments received, how many errors he made in handling documents, things like that.”

“How was his performance?”

“He was doing a great job. You would think he would not work so hard after the disappointment of getting demoted.”

“Did he take a pay cut?”

“Actually, no. When he was purchasing agent he was being paid the same as I was as an inventory clerk.”

“Sounds like Joe had reason to take it out on Rubin.”

“Rubin’s a former police detective, by the way,” Emerson pointed out.

“Where did he work?”

“Toluca Lake.”

“Do you know why he quit?”

“More money in hospital administration.”

“Let’s get to you,” Hollister interrupted. “If not for a lucky meeting, this could be you. Could it have been meant for you? Do you have any enemies you know of?”

“I don’t think any of the casting directors in town like me.”

“What is that, casting directors?” Hollister asked.

“I’m a part-time actor.”

“Ya been in anything we may have seen?”

“I was in one Adam Sandler movie, several commercials, the one with Catherine Zeta Jones.”

“Did you sleep with her?”

“Are you kidding?”

“All right, so you are a two-bit actor. Are you so bad someone would kill you over it? I doubt it. I am really interested in what was taken from this storeroom, Mitsi can you make their inventory?”

She shrugged, unenthusiastic. Inventory counts have that effect on people.

“Kid, you’re going to have to answer a lot of questions, so I encourage you to be truthful, because, you know, lying to the police comes back to you in the end. So, tell me about yourself, drug use, gambling, any trouble you ever been in?”

“Either of our victims ever in trouble with the law?”

“Not that I know of. But, I’ve never hung out with them after work, never been to their houses. There was no evidence that they had any problems that affected their work. Terry obviously was hoping to make enough money as a musician so he could quit and his heart was not particularly in his work, but he still did a good job. Oh, there was a supplier that was upset when he was going to lose the business, but that didn’t happen and they are OK now.”

“What was that all about?”

“I was on a consolidation of supplier kick and I asked Terry to reduce some of the suppliers since we had too many, and one guy took it particularly hard, so hard, I felt sorry for him, and told Terry to keep buying from him.”

“You don’t sound like a very good businessman,” Hollister smirked.

“Yeah, well, I’d rather be an actor, actually, so if I feel I have to sell my soul to do this job it’s just not worth it.”

Mitsi glanced at her watch and Hollister noticed.

“Late for your swim?”

Mitsi glared back.

“My partner’s one of these compulsive exercisers. A triathlete.”

“Really?” Emerson was impressed that he had figured that out by studying the telltale clues, the sunglass tan, the Polar gray plastic watch, and the fifteen per cent body fat physique.

“Gives me something to do after work. Like your acting classes.”

“You’re not a doughnut eating cop?”

Mitsi smiled. "I do it for the both of us," Hollister cut in. "OK, Miss triathlete, let's get our ducks in a row here. Menzies, we're gonna talk again. Don't leave the country."

"You're not serious are you? I didn't have anything to do with this."

"It's just an expression we use. In other words, we will talk again. And if you can think of anything else that would shed some light for us, here's our cards."

They passed him business cards. He knew which one of them he would call first.

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In the squad car, Mitsi leafed through he performance notebooks.

"Quite immaculate record-keeping he does," she said.

"See if you see any drop in performance from either one for a period of time. Maybe they had a down period we can look into."

"I can see this statistic, fill rate, was low in 2005, around 82%, and climbed pretty rapidly to 98% in a few months and then held. So something went on right after Menzies took over."

"Assuming 82% is bad and 98% is good," Hollister said.

"It would seem to be," Mitsi said.

This Emerson appeared to be a stat freak, Mitsi thought as she looked at his columns of numbers. It reminded her of her ex-boyfriend who was into fantasy sports, always keeping notebooks of sports statistics, getting on-line, tracking their records while games were in progress.

Then, she had that quality, too. After all, she maintained elaborate records of her triathlon training. Miles run, miles swum, and miles biked. Mitsi was 27 and had been on USC's swim team in college. Most triathletes were weak at the swim, so Mitsi had converted that talent into a competitive advantage. She trained 6 days a week, and had it down to a routine: a 2 hour run and 30 minute swim on Saturday; a 6 hour bike on Sunday. Monday off. Tuesday one-hour run and 30 minute swim. Tuesday 2-hour bike. Wednesday, one hour run and 30 minute swim. Thursday 1 hour swim and 1 hour run. Friday 2-hour bike. A total of 5 hours of running each week, 2 hours of swimming, and 10 hours on the bike every week.

If there was one area in her life she was unproductive in, that was her love life. Nada. Nothing there. She had thought that she would have met another triathlete in the past couple of years, and in fact, she had dated two of them. But neither one of them had made her wish to veer from her training routine. "Do you want to go out on Friday night?" No thanks. Biking. One of them had actually taken her up on "dating" by training together. But he had proven too competitive. He wouldn't slow down for her while running, so they didn't talk until the run was over. It didn't last more than a few weeks before he simply suggested she was too slow for him to date. So her dating productivity rate was, output = 0, input = 0.

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SUPPLEMENT: Part 2, THE SUPPLY CHAIN KILLER

“Let’s hear about this strategic meeting now.” It was Hollister and Mitsi again, interviewing Emerson.

“You want me to bore you, I guess,” Emerson responded. Gee, why did they start the day with me? Am I a suspect in this?” Emerson thought. The only good thing was he could talk to this Mitsi some more. Maybe Hollister would leave for a while.

“Well, we started out talking about the hospital mission.”

“Which is?”

“To be the leading provider of children’s health care in the city.”

“What do you mean by leading?”

“We would be the preferred hospital. Also the most profitable.”

“Well,” Hollister said, “there aren’t too many places you can have a baby in this city.”

“We don’t deliver babies in this hospital, Mr. Hollister.”

“Really? In a children’s hospital?”

“Yeah, some babies get transferred here shortly after birth, but we don’t have an OB/GYN. So we talked about the mission and then the long-term strategic plan and the annual plan.”

“Who was there?”

“The department heads. Rubin. Director of Nursing, Housekeeping, Maintenance, the nursing unit chiefs, Respiratory and Physical Therapy, Pharmacy, Accounting, about 25 of us in all.”

“And how many of these would know the victims?”

“They dealt with every one of them.”

“So what are the short term plans?”

“We have to plan out the move for the new hospital. It is four years away, but everything has to be sequenced at the right time, so in year one we do a needs analysis.”

“Back again to this issue with Rubin and Joe Estrada. Did Estrada ever threaten Rubin?”

“He’s a smart guy. Was a smart guy. Joe wanted another job and you can’t get one with a bad reference.”

“And he didn’t hold a grudge on you?”

“Seems like somebody held a grudge for Joe, doesn’t it?”

“Let us do the questioning here, kid. OK, Mitsi, can you go to the receiving area with Menzies. I’m gonna talk to Rubin upstairs.”

Finally some quality time with Mitsi, Emerson rejoiced. He led Mitsi to the receiving dock, where one of his supply aides, Jose Gomez, signed for



a shipment of Johnson and Johnson supplies. She wore a short-sleeved white blouse and a knee-length blue denim skirt. Man, she has better biceps than I do, Emerson thought.

“What exactly is your job?” Mitsi asked.

“I manage the whole thing. I negotiate the prices for supplies, make sure there are no trouble backorders, handle performance reviews, things like that.”

“A lot of responsibility for someone as young as you.”

“I kind of fell into this job. Did you study to be a police detective?”

“Can I see yesterday’s receiving paperwork? I studied criminal justice and sociology at USC. It is what I wanted to do. I expect I’ll go to law school in a few years, but I’d like to keep doing triathlons before I take on that task.”

Emerson handed her a stack of packing slips stapled to purchase orders.

“Yesterday’s shipments are all here.”

“I’ll need them all.”

“I have to make copies of them, though.”

“Let me ask about the new hospital. Who negotiated the building contract?”

“The hospital board, along with Rubin and the CFO. It’s one bid I was not involved with.”

“Do you know anything about the winning contractor?”

“No. Not involved. But hardly a reason to kill two people in the supply room, don’t you think?”

“Emerson, let me do my job. That chain come from here?”

“No. You might check the maintenance department. We don’t store chains. I don’t know where it came from, but if the guy came in here carrying a chain, he was here to kill somebody.”

“Our CSI is going over the chain and a few other things.”

“I hope you don’t mind my asking,” Emerson said, “are you seeing anyone?”

“Not at the moment,” she stopped walking.

“I’m not either, you want to go out sometime?”

“I can’t go out with someone involved in a case. Sorry.”

“Let’s solve the case, then,” Emerson sighed.

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Hollister sat across from Rubin, who seemed to think he was above answering questions of a police detective.

“Estrada had a grudge against you, that we know. You wanted to fire him but the kid never did. Why didn’t you fire him yourself?”

“I empower my managers to act on their own. When I appointed Menzies as a department head, he had to do the jobs that heads do, and that first action was to fire Estrada. If he didn’t want him fired, that was his choice.”

“Did he ever threaten you?”

“No. He never spoke to me after that. I’d see him in the hallway and he would look the other way.”

“Have there been any unusual incidents that might shed some light on a reason someone would murder him?”

“Estrada had two wives.”

“Tell me about this meeting you had at the time of the murder.”

“Strategic planning. You talk about long-term and short-term plans; issues of competition, staffing needs.”

“Are there any serious competition issues?”

“We just hired four cardiologists from Southwest. That just about decimated their cardiology division. Then, they hired one of our radiologists. Win four; lose one, that puts us ahead. We compete for patients, and staff. Southwest Hospital, County General, and Santa Monica are our prime competitors. Really any children’s hospital within a 25-mile radius. But, we offer more services than the others. There are certain specialties, say, orthopedics, if someone knows the area, and they’d go to Santa Monica for that. Most patients simply look at location. Some with money look for the best in the L.A. area, and we usually come out on top there. We still get 25% of our patients from the San Fernando valley.”

“Disgruntled employees? Can you list them?”

“None that go around making threats. Look, I have no idea who would want to kill those guys. I had no involvement with either of them.”

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