

Equipment Reliability, TPM and The Importance of Training Or Finding Better Employees

Clearly the recent past has proved extremely difficult for most industries. Revenues and sales are down, expenses are up and profit has been elusive at best. The news is full of stories about wage reductions, layoffs and other retrenchments. Among the first reductions many companies make is to reduce "non-essential" staff such as Human Resources including the training budget-assuming they had one at all. Other organizations will reduce staff not directly tied to production-such as maintenance techs. It is hard to fault the above "survival" tactics for some companies. Yet many world class companies continue to invest in training and developing their employees. What do they know or what have they discovered? What they understand is the reality that the more qualified, "better" employees they need to attack the future do not exist. With some rare exceptions, there is no pool of highly skilled, trained operators or maintenance techs with specific knowledge of your equipment waiting for the call. The only viable alternative is to develop such talent internally through training. Note: the same thinking can be applied to all levels of the organization.

It is difficult, some would say impossible to define the value of training. Perhaps we should remember the bumper sticker that shows up in the New England area around town meeting time. At the town meeting the topic always gets to the school budget and how expensive it is to educate our youngsters. The bumper sticker reads, "If you think education is expensive, try ignorance!" Perhaps we should think about the investment in training the same way.

Why is it that World-class companies invest so much time energy and money in training their employees at every level of the organization? They have recognized the importance of one of their greatest assets-people. At many companies, new employees are trained in depth in two very fundamental areas. The new folks spend some time on the skills of how to do a particular job while being indoctrinated in the mindset of continuous improvement. Companies such as Danaher Inc., Eaton, Boeing and a host of others have recognized that developing their employees is one of the keys to long-term success. They train employees on how to solve problems and then challenge them to find better and more accurate solutions. Trite but true-"high expectations drive high performance." It is not a coincidence that these organizations are outstanding performers in their respective markets.

Why do training at all beyond the basic work instructions and a few rudimentary rules and regulations about safety along with the administrative issues about work and pay? What message does the company send with the lack of emphasis on training? Who cares anyway? Many plants have such high turnover that the trained individual may soon walk out the door. When this happens the training effort and investment will be lost to the company and therefore be wasted. The answers to high turnover are beyond the scope of this article. However, well trained, valued employees rarely leave a company that invests in them.

It seems appropriate to ask how many quality errors are caused by the ignorance of the operator? How many quality non - conformances are driven by lack of knowledge? How much extra time do poorly trained technicians spend repairing a machine. Ignorance is a curable issue if we only make the effort. Another interesting question is, who is responsible for training employees? The answers to these questions are critical to your attack on the future and therefore your continued success.

The kind of training needed depends on the specifics of the job at hand. At the shop floor level, there is a great need for skill training but there is also a need to set the expectations of behavior. Folks need to know that the company needs and values their input regarding continuous improvement. The direct labor folks are the primary "value adders." As such they should be aware of the performance standards and why these are important.

Supervisors need training in how to lead. They also need training in a host of techniques such as conflict resolution and employee development and many others. The maintenance technicians need training in things like structured problem solving and perhaps TPM or understanding reliability centered maintenance. There are "scientific" tools such as Tribology (Oil Analysis), Thermal Imaging, Ultrasonics etc. just waiting to be applied to the right situation. Will training create a utopia of greater and greater profits? It will create more opportunities to succeed in a complex industrial environment and to achieve reliable capacity. If you think training is expensive try ignorance!

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