

Engaging Your Entire Plant Workforce for Improved Reliability

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What members of our plant-floor workforces do and how they do it directly impacts equipment performance and reliability. Traditionally, machine operators operate; maintainers maintain; engineers engineer; planner/schedulers plan and schedule; supervisors supervise; and managers manage. Oversimplification? Yes, but countless workplaces still languish in that old “job-classification-defines-what-you-do” rut.

What if we could go beyond the routinely deployed workforce skills and tap the underutilized talent? As you could imagine, most people have lives outside work, at home, in church, on community committees, or, perhaps, even have small sideline-business ventures. And they enjoy hobbies and other activities that let them use talents they don't necessarily bring to the workplace. Why is that?

I once worked with an old-school supervisor who was known to tell employees in his department, "You're paid to work here, not to talk, not to think." His remarks succeeded in cranking out production but also stifled employee enthusiasm for improving the operation. Sure, that's "old school," and it probably doesn't occur in your plants. But there are subtle ways the same message is sent to today's workforces.

Working with hundreds of plant-floor work groups over the years taught me about the true value of the untapped talent in the workplace. Most businesses tried to improve their plant performance by way of engineering, technologies, new machines, and the like. My work, however, almost always looked at the "people-side" of those operations for improvement. Read on to learn what I found time and again.

People, for the most part, wanted to help improve the operation of their equipment and their workspaces. Frequently, this desire to improve resulted in informal tweaks and workarounds they developed on their own. Most of these "improvements" made their work easier, less fatiguing, and more efficient. It may not have been pretty. But it worked for them.

When these employees were invited to work with multi-discipline groups on improving the performance and reliability of their equipment, they blossomed. They would always genuinely respond with suggestions from their perspective of working with and around the equipment every hour and minute of their respective workdays. NOTE: This is not only valuable insight. It is something maintainers, engineers, planners, supervisors, and managers could never possess.

Often, those little informal tweaks and workarounds led to adoption of a more formal modification. Engineers would quickly develop the modification with direct input from the equipment's end-user(s). Maintainers would ensure that the potential modification was maintainable. Supervisors would get the safety people involved to verify the hazard-free characteristics of the modification. And of course, the managers would almost always approve the funds to make such modifications permanent.

The SAME type of interaction occurred when it came to equipment reliability. In the very same setting, with the same multi-disciplined group, people would segue into equipment-maintainability improvements and, eventually, performance and reliability improvements. The key to success? Begin with improving equipment operation to fully engage the operators.

When plant-equipment operators and maintainers work with engineers, planners, supervisors, and managers to improve performance of equipment, wonderful and sustainable things happen. Are you wondering about the planners? Production planner/schedulers, as well as maintenance planner/schedulers were engaged to make sure improved times and practices were built into their systems.

But this is only the beginning. Just watch. Reliability breakthroughs and long-term improvements flow when these types of multi-disciplined groups are engaged in equipment performance and reliability troubleshooting and problem-solving.

About the Author

Bob Williamson is a long-time contributor to the “people-side” of the world-class-maintenance and manufacturing body of knowledge across dozens of industry types. His vast background in maintenance, machine and tool design, and teaching has positioned his work with over 500 companies and plants, facilities, and equipment-oriented organizations. Contact him directly at 512-800-6031 or by email at bwilliamson@theramreview.com.