

Facing Our Own Giants

Ever wonder why some places have really great maintenance and reliability results and others do not? Ever wonder why some maintenance crews perform like champions—preventing problems—and others keep fixing things that break? Well, there are many reasons and many excuses. But for the most part, maintenance and reliability results come from the behaviors and expectations of managers, supervisors, and leadership more than from the guys and gals on the plant floor working with their tools of the trade. Sure, if the maintenance technicians do not have the skills and knowledge to do things right the first time, they're the ones to blame for shoddy work. Or are they? Who put them there in the first place? Who allows them to do work they are obviously not fully qualified to do? Who decides to cut back on training and skills development because it is too expensive? Not the maintenance technicians. Managers, supervisors, and leadership create an environment where bad things seem to happen much of the time. Leadership actions often communicate their vision of the future.

There was a letter to the editor in our local paper here in North Carolina recently that went something like this:

The New Heat Pump: In April of last year, our 15-year-old heat pump gave up. We searched for a new one and bought the best from a local installer. It worked fine through the late spring and summer months. But when winter came, it would not keep the house warm. So we called for service from the company where we purchased the new heat pump. They sent out a technician who checked the auxiliary heat and emergency heat circuits and said everything was fine. It was not. The next cold night, we noticed that the coils were frosted up outside. We called them again. They sent out the technician, who stated that we had too much R410 refrigerant, so he removed some. After that, it would take all day for the house to warm up. The technician came back, removed the thermostat, checked it out, changed something in the program, and pronounced it “fixed.” The house still would not heat up. So I got out the schematics, started tracing the wiring, checked the thermostat and found that a small wire was missing between the auxiliary heat to the emergency heat terminals. Disgusted with the installer's technical service, I called another dealer, who sent another technician out. He put in the short wire and added more R410 refrigerant to the unit and it has been fine since. I highly recommend _____ Heating and Air Service for your heating and air condition work.

What kind of credibility did the manager of the heat pump installer have? Did the technician believe he or she was doing their very best to solve the problem? While the “talk” might have been credible and the technician seemed to know what the problem was, the results were just the opposite. Sound familiar? Have you experienced similar levels of “service” in you own organization? Sometimes, we get frustrated by little problems and sometimes they are giant ones.

The “giants” we face in today's workplace can create enormous amounts of fear among our maintenance crews. Our “giants” can be the plant manager who dictates, “Fix it fast or your job is on the line,” which translates into “We don't have time to fix it right, so just get it running again.” Or the “giants” can be the pressure the maintenance technician is under to hurry up and patch things up so they can go home and leave the problem to the next crew. Left unchallenged, the entire plant or facility work culture becomes demoralized, frustrated, and berated because of shoddy maintenance. The big ugly threatening “giant” wins.

A powerful new movie out on DVD *Facing the Giants* (2007, Sony Pictures Home Entertainment) is well worth seeing. It is about a struggling, downtrodden Georgia high school football team that seems to keep sinking into a pit of loss after loss year after year, then achieves seemingly miraculous success. There is one scene in the movie where the team believes they can't possibly win the next game, let alone the championship. One outspoken player—a player who others on the team looked up to—keeps grumbling that they don't have a chance to win. Coach Grant Taylor singles out that outspoken player, Brock, and challenges him to do the “death crawl” down the football field with another player on his back and to do his very best—not for the usual 20 yards or the painful 50 yards, but just the very best Brock could do. One other thing Coach Grant asked was that Brock do his very best while blind folded. While the entire team watched this challenge, and while Brock struggled but kept pushing ahead, not knowing where he was, the coach did his best to “coach” Brock to keep going, to keep giving his **very best**. Sure, Brock struggles against seemingly impossible odds. But as he progresses ever so slowly down the field, doing the “death crawl” blind folded, with a 160-pound player on his back, the entire team watched in awe. Brock, as burdened as he was, managed to crawl the entire length of the football field. He showed what his **very best** could be! Once the team saw that the seemingly impossible was really possible, the entire team was renewed and motivated to win. Then through their renewed belief, faith, hard practice, and skill building, they did win—and win big.

But what did Brock, the outspoken player really do? He showed that he could do much better than he typically demonstrated—much more than he believed was humanly possible. He had the skills, the knowledge, and the ability to perform at much higher levels. What did Coach Grant do? He shared his vision with the assistant coaches and the team, relied on his belief, faith, leadership, and coaching abilities, to bring out the **very best** in one of his team's key players. But look at what Brock and Coach Grant together accomplished for the team. While the Coach was the formal leader of the team, Brock was the informal leader of the team. Together, they showed that the seemingly impossible task could be accomplished only if they did their **very best**. Coach Grant did what all effective leaders do: Get people to reach levels of performance that they normally would not achieve by themselves—to go places they would not normally go by themselves. The remaining ingredients in the relationship between the Coach Grant and Brock were **trust** and **respect**. Without trust (confidence, faith, belief, reliance), there is fear. Without respect (admiration, high opinion, reverence), there is disregard and insolence. Without positive action, a leader's vision for the future is only a dream.

As we undertake improvements in maintenance and reliability in today's workplace, it is essential that we understand, appreciate, and use the roles of effective leadership—both formal leadership and informal leadership. As leaders, supervisors, managers, we must have credibility and integrity to gain and retain the trust of those we are leading to new levels of equipment performance and reliability. We have to learn to separate the smoke-and-mirrors improvement programs from the meaningful strategies we choose to deploy in the workplace. It is our responsibility to educate our leaders, our upper management, and company decision makers at all levels. Organizational leadership must be aligned if new levels of performance and reliability are to be achieved, sustained, and improved upon.

As maintenance and reliability leaders, it is also our responsibility to develop, nurture, and grow the informal leaders in our operations and maintenance groups. While they might appear to be the talented nay-sayers, they could be our biggest and best talented advocates. Through peer pressure

and modeling new behaviors and attitudes, these informal leaders can often move their crew or team ahead faster than the formal leaders, supervisors, or managers can.

As leaders, supervisors, and managers, we must also prepare our maintenance technicians, our crews to succeed individually and collectively. As Coach Grant did with Brock, and then the assistant coaches did with the entire team, they showed them, they trained and drilled them so they had the skills, the knowledge, and the attitudes to win. And they did. When we send someone out to do a job—someone whom we know deep down inside is not truly qualified to do the job right the first time—we lose our credibility, we lose respect, and we lose the trust of not only our crews but others in the plant and the company. Effective maintenance and reliability leaders act as teachers, as coaches, as mentors who develop the skills, knowledge, and attitudes of their maintenance technicians, their crews, and their organization.

Winning is not about developing one person to be a winner, nor is it about developing one of several crews to be a winner. As Rick Hendrick, owner of Hendrick Motorsports (NASCAR Race Teams) once told me, “*We’re going to win or lose together.*” When facing the “giants” in our workplace, we must often find new ways to harness the power to develop the strength to win... to win together.

[My heartfelt thanks to my friend Rex Gallaher at MARTS 2007 for the reminder of one of the many lessons learned from the movie *Facing the Giants*.]

© 2007

Robert M. Williamson
Strategic Work Systems, Inc.
Columbus, NC 28722
RobertMW2@cs.com
www.swspitcrew.com