

Maintenance is Not a Supplier

- **Maintain:** to sustain or preserve a desired level of facility, equipment and process performance
- **Maintenance department:** a group of people assigned to sustain or preserve a desired level of facility, equipment and process performance
- **Maintenance mechanic:** a person with sufficient skills and knowledge to sustain or preserve a desired level of facility, equipment and process mechanical performance
- **Maintenance budget:** a periodic financial plan to sustain or preserve a desired level of facility, equipment and process performance
- **Maintenance plan:** a structured approach to sustain or preserve a desired level of facility, equipment and process performance

There is a consistent message in these definitions of maintenance—sustaining or preserving a desired level of performance. But is it possible for the maintenance department and all the staff and budgets and plans to truly maintain the facility, equipment and process all by themselves? Is the maintenance department supposed to be the “supplier” to their “customer” production or facility owners? If they are truly suppliers, then why do facilities, equipment, and processes become unreliable, break down, or flat out fail catastrophically? Could it be that the traditional customer-supplier model does not work for maintenance and reliability?

Ponder those few questions as we begin a journey of discovering who really is responsible for maintenance and for assuring the “desired level of performance.”

Traditional Customers and Suppliers

Let’s depart from the world of maintenance for a moment. “The customer is always right” is a slogan that has been promoted in our society since the late 1800s at Chicago’s Marshall Field’s department store and in 1906 at France’s Ritz hotel with their saying, “The customer is never wrong.” But is it true? Not really, but it sounds good and sends a message that customer service is important. But there are times when the customer is not right. Sometimes, the customer is uninformed and does not know what is right but is ignorantly insistent. Suppliers to this kind of customers get frustrated, unhappy, and end up providing the wrong service. When an abusive customer ends up getting their way, it sends a message to other customers: Be abusive, and you’ll get your way. Sometimes, the customer is just plain wrong and won’t listen to helpful advice. Often, these types of customer behaviors lead to worse customer satisfaction and make the supplier of the services feel subservient. “If the customer is always right, then I’m always wrong” in these situations.

Unfortunately in today’s business lexicon, there is much discussion about promoting customer-supplier relationships internally in the work processes and externally with the paying customers. Although this makes perfect sense, the customer-supplier concept gets headed the wrong direction when the “customer is always right” adage gets unilaterally applied.

Let’s focus on the internal customer-supplier relationship. In a business—be it facility operation, manufacturing, utilities, transportation, warehousing and so on—the business benefits when all the departments and work processes come together in a competitive manner: Productivity is high,

goods and services are delivered in a timely manner, costs are low, and profitability is high. The individual departments all win or lose together. The internal customer-supplier relationship that has developed over the past 20 to 30 years is one of win-win relationships and one where both internal customers and internal suppliers are all heading toward common and mutually satisfying goals that ultimately benefit the business. What is not intended is the subservient intent of “the customer is always right.”

Maintenance as a Supplier

The maintenance department in your facility or plant might be treated as a supplier in the traditional sense by your customers in production: “We are always the top priority to maintenance! Production is king here!” But that kind of organizational thinking is counterproductive and sometimes devastating to the business.

The maintenance group typically has limited resources and is often further reduced during a budget year—budget cuts, overtime cutbacks, expenses deferred. The more the demand on maintenance and the more constrained the resources, the more equipment and reliability problems continue to grow. They cannot supply what they don’t have access to. Something has to stop: PMs, repairs, corrective work, projects, etc. Since maintenance is about sustaining desired levels of performance, I vote for stopping all non-maintenance-related projects in favor of focusing on facility, equipment, and process reliability work.

Insanity: Doing the same things, the same way, over and over, while expecting different results.

Now is the time to STOP this insanity!

Facility operation and production cannot behave as the customer, and maintenance cannot act as their supplier in the traditional way of thinking. Customers’ beating up on suppliers for a better deal and for more responsive service is not the answer. The maintenance department alone cannot make equipment and processes reliable in capital-intensive operations. Yes, it can work in the very short term but is rarely, if ever, sustainable as a competitive business solution.

Partners for Reliability and Performance

A customer-supplier partnership for reliable facilities, equipment, and processes is a much more cost effective and efficient way to run a capital-intensive business. In a customer-supplier partnership, there are mutually satisfying goals and expectations: Each partner continually works with the other to achieve common goals.

Effective and efficient maintenance is a critical goal in capital-intensive businesses. To achieve this goal, the customer-supplier partnership works two ways: Maintenance is both a supplier and a customer; and operations is both a customer and a supplier. For example, operations expects the equipment and processes to be reliable and high performing without unplanned interruptions due to breakdowns. Maintenance is in position to supply a whole host of services to assure the equipment is well maintained and reliable. However, in order to accomplish the actual maintenance tasks, operations must supply access to the equipment in a timely manner, equipment performance and downtime data, and most importantly properly trained and conscientious operators. That makes sense. Without access to the equipment, timely planned and preventive maintenance does not get done. Without the data, problems continue and root causes

go unexplored. And without properly trained and conscientious operators, the equipment gets abused and not cared for. The results are unreliable equipment and high-cost operations.

We can carry this customer-supplier partnership another step in the area of spare parts. For example, the parts stock room may be managed by the purchasing department, the internal supplier. Their typical goals are to supply spare parts, reduce the value of inventory, and control parts and supplies costs. Reduced parts inventory levels, stocking lower cost unreliable parts, and slow-moving parts removed from inventory can have a devastating affect on both operations and maintenance as “customers.” Odd and counterproductive behavior for an internal supplier! A customer-supplier partnership among maintenance, operations, and the purchasing/stock room departments can succeed at reducing parts inventory costs in ways that have no negative impact on operations or maintenance.

A win-win relationship is possible when we depart from many of the traditional ways of managing the internal business work processes. A customer-supplier partnership can go a long way to realizing highly reliable facilities, equipment, and processes at the lowest initial cost and lowest possible lifecycle cost. Collaboration is essential for business success.

Five Principles for a Maintenance and Reliability Partnership

Here are five proven principles applied to the partnership for reliability, productivity and capacity assurance:

1. All maintenance and reliability work, regardless of who performs it, is done according to standardized procedures, job plans, schedules, and duration with specified outcomes or results.
 - “Maintenance and reliability work” refers to all forms of work to sustain or preserve the desired level of performance including planned, preventive, predictive, corrective, repairs, and emergency repairs.
2. Every maintenance and reliability work request is documented, acknowledged, and signed-off upon completion by the requestor(s). Visual cues in the workplace and at the point of the request are used to communicate.
3. All maintenance and reliability work processes are well defined, communicated throughout the organization, and managed to avoid inefficient complexity. Maintenance and production (or operations) schedules, roles and responsibilities are clearly defined and seamlessly interwoven.
4. All of the maintenance and reliability activities, communications links, and work processes have built-in tests that signal when a problem arises. Continual response to the resolution of these problems is required.
5. Any improvements to these four principles must be made in accordance with the scientific method* under the guidance of an experienced teacher/facilitator closest to the opportunity for improvement. [*Problem(s) detected, data collected and analyzed,

hypothesis (ideas) generated, ideas tried, results measured, and if the idea worked improvements are made.]

Summary

Maintenance is not a supplier in the traditional sense. Maintenance as a supplier often gets trapped into project work that has nothing to do with actual maintenance. This can take valuable resources away from the goal of reliable facilities, equipment, and processes. We must depart from the traditional “maintenance-is-the-supplier and they-are-the-customer” and “the customer-is-always-right” syndromes in today’s competitive high-performance world. These often traditional approaches to maintenance will rarely lead to sustainable reliability of equipment and processes. Break away from tradition. Develop a Reliability Culture based on these five proven principles for a customer-supplier partnership. Maintenance is not the business but rather an interdependent part of the business. And we are going to succeed together in a maintenance and reliability partnership.

Suggested reading:

- Kjerulf, Alexander, “Top 5 Reasons Why ‘The Customer Is Always Right’ is wrong,” 2006 (<http://positivesharing.com>)
- “Decoding the DNA of the Toyota Production System” by Steven Spear and H. Kent Bowen, **Harvard Business Review**, September-October 1999. Reprint 99509 (<http://harvardbusiness.org/>)

© 2009
Robert M. Williamson
Strategic Work Systems, Inc.
Columbus, NC 28722
RobertMW2@cs.com
www.swspitcrew.com