

## Share This with Senior Operations Management

One of the biggest challenges we have in the maintenance arena is being fully valued by our senior leadership. Many don't know that we are routinely asked to do so much non-maintenance work, which prevents us from doing productive maintenance work. The potential for eliminating equipment, process and facility problems... the potential for lowering operating and maintenance costs... the potential for improving plant performance often goes unexplored because senior management does not appreciate what maintenance is truly capable of accomplishing. This is not a "poor pitiful me" story but rather serious observations and recommendations based on evidence from hundreds of plant visits, assessments, audits, discussions and improvement initiatives. Ever wonder why many capital-intensive businesses fail to achieve their competitive potential? Read on.

**Note to maintenance readers:** After reading this column and making the appropriate underlining and margin notes, make a copy and drop it on the desks of your senior operations management.

### Productive Maintenance Work

The number one priority of the maintenance organization should be to sustain a desired level of performance for the equipment, processes and facilities. Sustaining or preserving the desired operating conditions is essential for competitiveness in a capital intensive operation. Oftentimes, maintenance is called upon to make repairs that restore the equipment, processes and facilities to the desired operating condition. Planned repairs are productive maintenance. Emergency repairs can be costly and should be avoided. That's why we believe in a sound preventive maintenance program: Prevent the causes of problems. **The result of productive maintenance work is lower maintenance cost per unit produced.**

### Non-productive Maintenance Work

Unfortunately many maintenance organizations get redirected from their primary priority of maintaining the assets. Equipment relocation, installations and special projects might be important to the business, but these take valuable time away from the planned and preventive maintenance. Without a rigorous planned and preventive maintenance approach, the assets break down or require emergency, unplanned repairs. **This increases the maintenance cost per unit produced.**

Emergency and unplanned repairs are often caused by the lack of proper preventive maintenance. In other words, many asset failures can be prevented.

While special projects or relocating and installing equipment might seem like a common sense use of the in-house maintenance resources, it can be very counterproductive. Redirecting maintenance resources often leaves planned and preventive maintenance tasks undone, which can lead to more unplanned and emergency repairs. **Again, this increases the maintenance cost per unit produced.**

### Not Enough Maintenance Personnel

A plant maintenance department recently complained to me that they did not have enough maintenance mechanics (or technicians) and asked if I could help them justify more staff. During a plant walkthrough, I noticed a number of maintenance staff hanging new lighting fixtures in the high-bay production area. When I reviewed the maintenance work orders and observed the typical workdays, I noticed that they were operating in a highly reactive mode responding to countless trouble calls. When I reviewed their PM completions, I discovered that they were doing very little

preventive work. The first recommendation was to contract out all of the lighting installation. This will free up maintainers to be more responsive to the critical needs of the plant and to focus on more preventive maintenance, which they did. The contractor labor charges were less than the in-house maintenance staff, and they were more efficient because they had only one job to focus on: hanging new lighting fixtures. The contractor's work went virtually uninterrupted. More planned and preventive maintenance work was accomplished, and trouble calls started declining.

### **The Bane of “Lean Projects”**

Many organizations are pursuing “Lean Operations,” which involves many continuous improvement (CI) and TPM teams making improvements and changes to their work areas and their equipment. Typically, they rely on the maintenance department to support their action plans. Because it is Lean or CI or TPM, it must be a top priority or the teams will get frustrated and lose momentum. So the maintenance shifts from their planned and preventive work to these special projects. Guess what? Soon, they become more reactive and trouble calls start pouring in because the true maintenance work is set aside. Special projects are often seen as an interruption to routine work within the maintenance organizations that have limited resources. On the other hand, special projects completed in house are seen as free labor.

### **What is Maintenance for Anyway?**

All too often, the maintenance department becomes overwhelmed with work, and all of those “number one” priority jobs have to be sifted down to the critical few. Some requestors will make a work request as a safety item so that it will get to the top of the priority list. Stop playing games. Asset maintenance is the true number one priority of maintenance. Safety modifications—true safety modifications—can and should be addressed in a timely manner. The maintenance request basket often gets full, overfilled with things that are 1) not maintenance and 2) problems caused by lack of maintenance.

So, what is “maintenance” all about anyway? When I visit plants and facilities and ask that question, I get the textbook answers, but more often than not, I get confused looks and fuzzy responses. Most organizations do not know what maintenance is! There are no clear guidelines, no charters, no policies that guide either the perceptions or the realities of what maintenance is.

Try this: Ask anyone in a leadership position this question: “What is **safety** all about anyway?” Or ask this: “What is **quality** all about around here?” Better yet ask this: “Why should we listen to our **customers**?” I guarantee you will get very specific answers and examples that make sense to your business. Start asking the same questions on the plant floor, and you will likely get some very well thought out answers. Most people in your plant or facility understand safety, quality and customers. Senior leaders expect that, don't they? In fact, they probably have very specific safety and quality expectations and goals, with posters, signs and possibly even periodic meetings and feedback reports. And if employees do not adhere to the safety and quality expectations, there are often very specific and severe consequences. The bottom line here: Safety, quality and customer principles go well beyond the safety, quality and marketing departments. These are a way of life in today's competitive environment.

Now, ask the same people polled with the previous questions this one: “What is maintenance all about anyway?” Did you get specific answers and examples that make sound business sense? Most people polled probably will cite problems fixed, projects completed or will invariably get into all the stuff that does not get done by maintenance. This is a problem of significant magnitude. A

problem that will have a negative impact on the business—especially the more capital intensive your business is. Unfortunately, the maintenance paradigm is often one of fix, repair, special projects and odd jobs. The maintenance paradigm is one of subservience to operations, and expense, an indirect overhead. **This often leads to high maintenance costs and the lack of a productive purpose.**

### **Call to Action**

Without a clear policy, a set of expectations and dedicated resources safety, quality, and customer responsiveness will not happen. Employees understand the importance of safety, quality and customers. Likewise, without a clear policy, a set of expectations and dedicated resources true maintenance will not happen. Employees do not understand; they are unclear as to the roles and responsibilities of maintenance. Imagine how unproductive and uncompetitive your business would be if employees did not respect the importance of safety, quality and customer service.

Maintenance must have a productive purpose in an era of a growing skills shortage, especially in maintenance jobs, an era of increasing competitiveness and serious cost controls. Maintenance efficiency and effectiveness is crucial to business prosperity. Maintenance is truly about sustaining a desired level of equipment, process, and facility performance, not fixing things that break or countless special projects. A senior operations manager can make the maintenance paradigm shift happen. (If you already have made it happen, bless you and thank you. You are worth your weight in gold.)

One last thing to remember: Maintenance by the maintenance department alone will not necessarily lead to reliable equipment, processes, and facilities. **Entire organizations must share a new paradigm of reliability.**

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