

“Why should we care?”

What do these have in common: workplace organization and orderliness, 5S, housekeeping, tardiness, absenteeism, safety, labor shortages, and equipment maintenance and reliability? For starters, we have seen significant efforts to improve all of these areas of business for years. And sometimes, the results of these efforts go dormant, plateau, or stop all together. For example, many plants and facilities have had numerous initiatives to “clean things up” and put things in their places. And many times, the results don’t last. It’s almost like cleaning up the workplace before the important customer or executive team visits. You know the drill, right? Well, I once met a CEO who after a plant tour would sit down in the conference room and show the paint spots (usually yellow, red, and gray) on the soles of his shoes. He was trying to send a message that this type of “cleanup” is unnecessary and a flagrant waste of time and money; besides, it ruined his shoes. This place “should look like this, or better, all the time!” he would say. The same could be said of numerous “improvement programs.” They’re kicked off with fanfare and lots of support, and then they go dormant because of a lack of follow-through or other initiatives competing for resources. Meanwhile, attitudes are shaped.

A long list of short-lived improvements shapes the attitudes on the plant floor and tends to influence absenteeism and tardiness and quite often affects workplace safety: The poorer the attitudes, the higher the attendance problems and safety incidents. Equipment maintenance often follows the same track as these other “human-induced” workplace problems. Standing by and watching equipment deteriorate to the point of failure in some plants leads to time in the break room for the operators and others: Breakdowns are rewarded! Then the “maintenance guys” have to work through break times and meals and sometimes through weekends to get the equipment back up and running, knowing all along that the causes of the problems could have been prevented. Later, the plant manager gets upset with maintenance guys being in the break room when it is not break time. Attitudes sink to new lows. “*Why should we care?*”

I’m sure all of us have seen high turnover in certain departments in our plants: People just don’t want to work there. So, they find the first opportunity to bid out, sign a job posting in another area of the plant, or just quit and go somewhere else. Hostile working conditions can prevent a stable experienced workforce in these areas, and the junior inexperienced employees struggle to just keep things going during their shift. Attitudes suffer. “*Why should we care?*”

The bottom line that I have heard in too many plants over the past 30-some years is this: “*If the company doesn’t care, why should we care?*” Improvement initiatives are often stopped dead in their tracks when this kind of attitude prevails in a plant, a department, or even in a crew.

What—or better yet who—is the “company” anyway? Sure, it can be a building, the name on the top of the paycheck, the badge, the owners, the stockholders, the president, the CEO. All too often, the “company” is represented by the beliefs and behaviors of first-line supervisors, mid-level management, plant management group, by the leaders. Attitudes are often shaped by the “perceived company.” We should also recognize that the “company” is also a business, a financial entity measured by profit and loss, return on investment, a money-making machine in one form or another. So if the “company” does not make money, it ceases to exist. It’s not an early retirement home for the “why-should-we-care club.” Leadership shapes attitudes.

Why should we care? I’ve seen many successful operations that are built on a sound foundation of “can-do” attitudes of the entire staff—plant floor to CEO. I have seen dozens of plants and facilities that were great places to work primarily because of the attitudes, not because the facility was new or they paid more than anyone else in the area. What made them great places to work included respect for people throughout the organization. Then there was a prevailing culture that abhorred disorder, interruptions, defects, and errors. Their workplaces were relatively clean, organized, well lit, comfortable, and safe. Their equipment was reliable. People worked together across departments, shift-to-shift, shop floor, and with the “carpet dwellers” in the front offices. As a whole, they were not afraid to work hard to get the job done right the first time. They also continually sought ways to make their work easier. Attitudes were great! Turnover was almost non-existent.

Absenteeism and tardiness rarely occurred. People cared. “*Why should we care? We are the company,*” they would respond. Union leadership responded positively: “*If there’s no company, there’s no union!*” They knew how their job assignment fit into the big picture of things in the company. They knew—and could show anyone who asked—how their performance would be measured and how that directly supported the key performance indicators of success for the company. They worked together to solve the little problems before they ever became big ones because... “*We ARE the company.*”

Leadership at all levels in these companies set the tone of the workplace. Be they first-line supervision, department managers, plant managers, or executives, they behave in ways that reinforce the belief that “we’re going to win or lose together.” Leaders prevent barriers from forming or they tear them down when they exist. They have high regard for everyone in their areas of responsibility—they treat them with respect. The golden rule “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you” is part of everyone’s behavior and attitude. Simply stated, they have respect for people, which leads to respectable bottom lines, balance sheets, and financial statements.

We are most likely in the worse era for attracting qualified maintenance workers in U.S. history. Manufacturers have been on a quest for more than a decade to get more young people interested in careers in manufacturing. A big part of our competitiveness struggle is built on a foundation that has been set in place for more than 50 years and unfortunately has been reinforced as late as this week: *Industrial jobs are nasty and plant closings lead to massive layoffs.*

There is a continuing short supply of maintenance workers for many reasons, including those discussed in this article. But think about one more reason: A chaotic “why should we care” work environment. If “truth in help-wanted advertising” was practiced, the want ads would look something like this:

“Help Wanted: Experienced maintenance technician to work on any equipment problem in a wide variety of conditions: dark, dirty, greasy, hot, steamy, cold, confined, indoors, outdoors, at heights, under difficult equipment. Must have own tools and be willing to work odd and irregular hours, weekends, and holidays. Stamina to work through break times, meals, and shift change week after week with a positive attitude is required. The ability to routinely take short cuts to get the job done fast is a plus. Working as a team-of-one without much support is essential. When times get tough, you will be let go. Call 800-WHO-CARESs for more information.”

Obviously, we must find ways to clean up our image and promote it aggressively. Why should we care? If we *don’t* care, how can the company be successful? How can we compete against offshore low-wage, low-productivity countries? If we don’t care, how can we attract the best and the brightest to our plants and facilities? If we don’t care, how can our communities benefit from wages, tax base, and community service work provided by successful companies and businesses? Why should we care? Successful, sustainable businesses are built around people at all levels of the company who truly care. We should care. It is contagious. If we don’t care, it shows; and unfortunately, that’s contagious too. **Let’s show that we honestly care!**

© 2007
Robert M. Williamson
Strategic Work Systems, Inc.
Columbus, NC 28722
RobertMW2@cs.com
www.swspitcrew.com