

The Case of the Gloves

Written by Robert M. Williamson, Strategic Work Systems, Inc.
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Robert M. Williamson, Strategic Work Systems, Inc. It was on the afternoon shift that an overloaded maintenance mechanic took time to "think" about what he was really doing for the company, to use some of the "empowerment" and "improvement" training he had been given. He realized he was responsible for eight machines, each with eight positions, with an operator tending each machine.

Usually, this mechanic was assigned two types of work: major repair and minor/routine maintenance. But whenever he is doing minor/routine maintenance, he cannot be doing major repairs. When he is not doing major repairs, the maintenance department management gets on his back to work faster. When he spends time on major repairs, the production department management and the operators are on his back because they cannot get "pounds out the door."

For the mechanic, this was an ever-present, perplexing problem to which he believed there must be a better way. Then it hit him! "What if I teach the operators to do some of the minor/routine maintenance themselves, especially the kind that requires just a few hand tools?" The operators were very receptive. When their eight positions were down, management hounded them, and their work was much more difficult.

The mechanic knew that on the afternoon shift, he could do the training, the operators could do the minor/routine repairs, and no one else would need to know. If he asked the union and management for permission, he probably would get shot down.

The mechanic began preparing. He got several wrenches and screwdrivers and some small parts, and began to teach the operators how to do just the basics to keep their

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machine positions running product. The operators, with some coaching, quickly were making minor repairs. Production output nearly doubled. The mechanic was able to get all of his major repairs done on time or ahead of time. This allowed him to help the operators with their maintenance skills and teach them a little more. All was great.

Until... the inspection department started rejecting more and more product because of grease on the outer layers of the white material they were producing—and only on the afternoon shift. Management found that operators were getting grease on their gloves when they did minor repairs, and when they handled the product, it, too, got greasy. Management decided this must stop: "No more maintenance work by operators!"

The mechanic's workload doubled. All of it couldn't be done on shift. Production volumes went down because more positions were not operating while they waited for the mechanic.

Afternoon shift mechanics and operators are very resourceful. They got two pairs of gloves: one for operating and changing product and another for doing minor repairs. Production levels went back up, and the mechanic's repair work got done on time. This sharing of tasks and teamwork contributed to higher levels of productivity and quality for months.

Until... someone in the accounting office noticed how much the afternoon shift was spending on gloves. "This can't continue," management stated. "Operators are supposed to operate, and mechanics are supposed to fix. And besides, look at what has happened to our Glove Budget."

Well, the "empowerment" and "improvement" training the afternoon-shift employees had been given over the past few years and the improvements they made on their own seemed to go together. "If only our leadership had the same training. If only they had believed what we were being trained to do. If only..."

Now, the company and plant management have discovered Total Productive Maintenance (TPM). They see TPM as a way to build a "sense of equipment ownership among the operators and build teamwork with maintenance." The thought of involving

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operators in minor maintenance was a major breakthrough in management's thinking. "Now," management asks, "just how do we get operators and maintenance mechanics working together on their equipment?"

*Author's note: This is a true story. Not only did the company lose the production and maintenance gains from the work group's "experiment" but it also lost credibility—the credibility that it truly believed in empowerment and improvement, past, present, and future. Management recognized not the business and teamwork gains, but rather the deviations from traditional management/work paradigms. **MT***

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