While the idea of a group hug may sound nice, that's not what we really need. Time, labor and control are key to the efficient coordination of maintenance and operations.

I write from a personal perspective: Maintenance has taken a bad rap. We're not a bunch of knuckle-dragging, coffee-slurping, computer-illiterates that never made it past eighth grade. We are, in fact, a skilled, experienced and largely well-trained workforce, excellent at troubleshooting and proficient in the systems that run our plants. Unfortunately, we also reflect an aging workforce, with no deep bench to call upon at this point in the game. What we need is a little TLC.

I'm not talking about a group hug (though there's nothing wrong with that). This TLC stands for Time, Labor and Control. Every maintenance organization needs time on the equipment, with the appropriately trained labor, managed with controls.

Time means money

We know "time is money," but what does that really mean? When a system is down for whatever reason, there's a cost. Most people think first of lost production, but there are other costs, such as those for wages and utilities. Workers typically aren't sent home when a system goes down, nor are plant utilities turned off. These costs simply continue to accrue. Common

sense dictates—*and studies show*—when organizations fail to consider such costs from a “big picture” perspective, their profits suffer.

On the operations side, no one would ever run a facility without accurate production bills of material, personnel to operate equipment and a production schedule. It’s the same in maintenance. Organizations, however, must learn to blend the goals of both operations and maintenance so required work can be achieved in the shortest period of time and in the least disruptive manner.

Labor must be trained

Clearly, fewer workers are entering the maintenance field. We’re losing skilled craftsmen faster than we can replace them. We also seem to have lost the ability to troubleshoot and diagnose. Apprenticeships, too, have disappeared. This long-time practice through which a company’s elder statesman trains a tenderfoot on equipment ins and outs has been replaced by what one plant manager calls “changengineers”—*technicians who can change broken parts, but not conduct root cause analyses.*

The only way to ensure the next generation has a fighting chance to maintain the equipment they’re responsible for is to train them. This must include a robust program that teaches how to capture equipment history in the CMMS, diagnose root cause failures and implement proactive rather than reactive maintenance strategies.

Control is guidance

Control does not mean micromanaging—*it means managing the work that needs to be done.* This involves work identification: What is the right work to perform? Most companies have work-order systems in place for planning and scheduling work and for capturing information such as work and equipment history that helps guide the continuous-improvement journey.

Control also involves the many metric-based benchmarks that define that journey. These include MTBF (Mean-Time-Between-Failure), MTTR (Mean-Time-To-Repair), Planned vs. Actual, Unscheduled Downtime, Availability and many others. Metrics drive behaviors, and it’s well known that what gets measured gets done. As business professor Aaron Levenstein once noted, “Statistics are like bikinis. What they reveal is suggestive, but what they conceal is vital.”

TLC leads to world-class

The best organizations share similar attributes that set them apart from the average. Here are some of the common practices I see among the elite, regardless of industry:

- Strong training programs for operators and maintainers.

- Early operator detection/notification of failure and sense of ownership of equipment.
- Mandatory cross-functional morning meetings with managers, supervisors, and leads representing Operations and Maintenance. Engineers, supply chain and quality assurance are sometimes included.
- Troubleshooting, root cause and diagnosing practiced as a team effort by operators, planners and engineers.
- Adequate time allowed to correct issues the first time.
- A strong commitment to eliminate system defects.
- Excellent supply-chain and storeroom operations.

Reality check

Having visited hundreds of facilities in my career, I can easily spot those where operators and maintainers are accutomed to perform separate, distinct tasks, as well as those where the members of these groups seem to blend in and work more like a team. In the latter type of plant, people know that maintenance succeeds whenever TLC is applied. Ask yourself, how's the TLC
at your plant?
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