Written by Bob Baldwin, Editor
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When companies shift their focus from maintenance and repair to reliability and maintainability (R&M), interesting things happen. Maintenance costs go down and equipment availability goes up. The need for capital and spare parts inventory decreases while production capacity and quality increase.

But most companies realize only a small portion of the potential return because they are applying R&M much too late, after the equipment is installed. By that time, 95 percent of the life cycle cost has been determined. R & M must begin, at the beginning, in the conceptual phase, before the equipment is built.

Members of one group are taking a proactive stance and are determined to drive the R & M process upstream into the equipment design process. It is the Maintenance Excellence Roundtable, a small group of maintenance professionals from Allied Signal, Alumax of South Carolina, Baxter Healthcare, Dofasco, DuPont, Eastman Kodak, Exxon Chemical, Ford, Novartis Crop Protection, Sunoco, U.S. Postal Service, and this magazine. The group meets annually at a member's plant to discuss maintenance issues. This year's meeting was hosted in November by Sunoco at its Sarnia, Ont., refinery.

A full afternoon of the group's two-day conference program was devoted to reliability in design. Four members made presentations on their initiatives in this area, followed by an open discussion on the subject.

I thought one of the most helpful nuggets of R&M wisdom was voiced during the discussion by Hal Raffa of Ford's corporate office for manufacturing equipment reliability and maintainability (and a major contributor to Reliability and Maintainability Guideline for Manufacturing Machinery and Equipment published by the Society of Automotive Engineers).

Raffa indicated that much can be learned about a potential supplier by simply asking its representatives to explain their reliability and maintainability process, and then following up with questions about the resulting improvements to the equipment.

When you ask this question, you may not get the answers you deserve, but you will be sending a message to the vendor that your company would rather produce product than maintain equipment.

I know I have some new questions for the next press conference I attend. I can hardly wait. **MT**

Thanks for stopping by,