

Maintenance is NOT a Department

Written by Robert M. Williamson, Strategic Work Systems, Inc.
Monday, 01 January 2001 08:56



Robert M. Williamson, Strategic Work Systems, Inc. Modern business has organized itself into a very noncompetitive position. In most manufacturing plants and facilities, there are numerous "departments" with their own organizations and budgets. A maintenance department is often one of those. Unfortunately, maintenance is not a department. Maintenance means "sustaining; preserving good working order, optimum condition, or a level of performance," not being on call to fix things. Too often, the maintenance department is looked upon as the sole maintainers of equipment, facilities, processes, and buildings. They cannot do it alone anymore.

Equipment has maintenance problems, and the company has a department. Now is the time to re-focus modern business on addressing maintenance problems regardless of the department structures, sharing responsibility for maintaining equipment, facilities, and buildings.

One of the plants we are observing has operated for more than 20 years with a "fix-it" mindset and a maintenance department with a tight budget. Today, for example, it has three air compressors, two of which operate to supply air to the thousands of small air leaks throughout the plant. This condition didn't just happen overnight. It took 20 years of a typical maintenance approach—fixing things that break and tightening the budget—to get there. The reliability engineer estimates that they budget and spend more than \$200,000 each year to operate and maintain these compressors just to supply air to the leaks. Add to that cost the initial capital investment for those extra compressors and the ongoing electrical usage. This represents a controllable expense that the maintenance department was helpless to address because the air leaks are located in the production departments and were not seen as a maintenance problem.

But the plant mindset is beginning to change. The maintenance department was

Maintenance is NOT a Department

Written by Robert M. Williamson, Strategic Work Systems, Inc.
Monday, 01 January 2001 08:56

restructured with "reliability leaders" responsible for each of the primary manufacturing areas. Maintenance management and skilled planners and crews now have responsibility for defined areas of the plant. Fourteen months ago, they engaged production and maintenance management along with maintainers, operators, and process quality people to focus on improving the performance and reliability of one of the plant's most critical constraint processes. It worked! (See Viewpoint 3/00) Performance and reliability improved significantly and has been sustained. These new maintenance methods also have begun to spread to other similar processes. The results:

- Availability continues to climb.
- Production throughput has more than doubled.
- Fewer operators are required.
- Maintenance costs declined nearly 16 percent.
- A capital project to add another machine was cancelled.
- Maintainers and operators have more time to focus on preventive maintenance of critical equipment.

Surprisingly, these improvements are not the most significant. The plant now has production management in four different areas applying the same team-based maintenance techniques to their critical processes. A sense of ownership is emerging because production and maintenance are working together to eliminate the causes of poor performance and reliability in sustainable manners. The plant manager is whole-heartedly endorsing, encouraging, and in 2001 holding the production department leaders responsible for this new maintenance and reliability strategy as part of their business and performance objectives. Their work culture is changing. Wonderful things begin to happen in a work culture when maintenance ceases to be a "department" and emerges as a "responsibility" that everyone shares.

In addition to the significant tangible results, there are numerous intangibles:

- Communication improves between the maintainers and the operators.
- Better understanding of the equipment functions develops.
- More minds look for ways to make equipment easier to operate, inspect, and maintain with fewer problems.

These intangibles obviously lead to more tangible performance results. This is proof enough that operating costs will decline and performance will improve when more business leaders learn that maintenance is not a department but a shared responsibility to preserve equipment, building, and facility condition. **MT**