



In many businesses, having easy access to critical assets and the people who maintain them—as well as adequate time to make lasting improvements—is a rare opportunity. That's what many organizations have had over the past year (and what some will continue to have into the foreseeable future). In other words, most of us can look back at 2009 as truly being a time for maintenance.

Economic downturns give us a chance to make improvements that typically can't be accomplished (for whatever reasons) during more prosperous times. Remember, though, whether you're tapping into periods of slow production in a manufacturing plant, idle times in a transportation business or distribution center or vacancies in a commercial facility, that it's crucial to avoid engaging in/lingering over meaningless activities. Instead, it's important to spend your time and focus your energies on boosting the efficiency and effectiveness of your revenue-generating capabilities!

Last year, a period fraught with more economic challenges than we can count, was just such an opportunity for maintenance. Here's a summary of "lessons learned" from some of my favorite 2009 "Uptime" columns. Consider adopting them as New Year's resolutions to help improve your business' competitiveness in 2010—*and beyond*.

Lessons From Auto Manufacturing (January/2009)

This was not my first column about the automobile industry. In May 2007, I wrote about "The Rise & Decline of Auto Manufacturing" that pointed out how the "Big Three" U.S. auto makers were repeating the mistakes of the British auto industry and government in the 1970s—*which help lead to that industry's downfall in the 1980s*

. Throwing money at any problem without a strategy to make far-reaching change typically does not work.

What we learned...

- Historically, the auto industry has set the stage for manufacturing strategies across many other sectors.
- History repeats itself and often tells us why things are the way they are today.
- Status quo, complacency and ignorance can kill a once thriving business. In a competitive environment, to stay the same is to lose ground!
- Learn from history and the pitfalls that hurt businesses and workforces.
- Successful businesses and workforces help communities and nations thrive.

Factory Jobs Anyone? (April/2009)

Imagine: You're 15 years old, like new technology, built your own computer and have set up a wireless network. What would you like to do when you grow up? All "they" (i.e. your parents, teachers, counselors and other school administrators) seem to care about any more is math and science and what college you wish to attend. You, however, have other interests—*making things, building things, solving things, figuring things out, investigating*. But, then, you hear the news about the dismal industrial economy. Maybe one or more of your relatives, neighbors and/or friends' parents may have lost their jobs as manufacturing slowed down. Would you really be interested in learning more about working in a "factory?" Nah, doesn't register as an option.

What we learned...

- If there ever were a time when we needed to actively nurture and recruit young minds for maintenance and reliability careers, it is NOW.
- We must promote careers in maintenance and reliability at your local middle and high schools and community-technical colleges.
- We should sponsor plant tours for career days.
- We can spread the word that creative and well-paying jobs often go unfilled by talented people.

Fill Out Work Orders? Who's Got Time for Paperwork? (May/2009)

Maintenance work orders are often seen as an extra burden to the maintainers, as well as to those who are requesting the work to start with. But without work order history, the maintenance organization is at risk and equipment problems will likely get worse.

What we learned...

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- Maintenance work orders help define what is to be done and what was completed.
- Work orders with “date needed” rather than “priority” rankings allow logical scheduling or maintenance workload planning.
 - Estimated hours listed on the work orders help plan daily and weekly workloads.
 - Actual hours worked and complete descriptions of the work accomplished lead to more accurate estimates.
 - Parts used listed on the work orders help in the search for better, more cost effective and more reliable parts.
 - If maintenance work orders are not used, it becomes impossible to justify maintenance budgets and headcount. Maintenance work order histories allow you to PROVE the need.
- While maintenance work orders may seem like an extra burden, this simple paperwork must become part of the job just like locking and tagging for safety.
 - Without properly completed work orders you cannot improve.

Maintenance Is Not A Supplier (June/2009)

Maintenance as a “supplier” often gets trapped into “project work” that has nothing to do with actual maintenance. Thus, we must depart from the traditional “maintenance-is-the-supplier and they-are-the-customer” and “the customer-is-always-right” approaches; they rarely lead to sustainable reliability of equipment and processes. Maintenance is not THE business but rather an interdependent PART of the business.

What we learned...

- All maintenance and reliability work, regardless of who performs it, should be done according to standardized procedures, job plans, schedules and duration with specified outcomes.
 - Every maintenance and reliability work request should be documented, acknowledged and signed-off upon completion by the requestor(s).
 - All maintenance and reliability work processes should be well defined, communicated throughout the organization and managed to avoid inefficient complexity.
 - Maintenance and production (or operations) schedules, roles and responsibilities are clearly defined and seamlessly interwoven.
 - All maintenance and reliability activities and work processes should have built-in tests that signal when a problem arises.
 - Any improvements to these principles must be made in accordance with the scientific method under the guidance of an experienced teacher/facilitator closest to the opportunity for improvement.

Share This With Senior Operations Management (July/2009)

One of the BIGGEST challenges we have in the “maintenance arena” is being fully valued by our senior leadership. Many don’t know that we are routinely asked to do so much non-maintenance work—*which actually prevents us from doing productive maintenance work.*

Without a clear policy, a set of expectations and dedicated resources, safety, quality and customer responsiveness will not happen. Likewise, without a clear policy, a set of expectations and dedicated resources, true “maintenance” will not happen. Imagine how unproductive and uncompetitive your business would be if employees did NOT respect the importance of safety, quality and customer service.

What we learned...

- A “Reliability Policy” defines how ALL employees should respond to equipment problems and opportunities.
- Maintenance must have a productive purpose in an era of a growing skills shortage (especially in maintenance jobs), increasing competitiveness and serious cost controls.
- Maintenance efficiency and effectiveness are crucial to business prosperity.
- Maintenance is truly about sustaining a desired level of equipment, process and facility performance, NOT about fixing things that break or special projects.
- Maintenance by the maintenance department alone will not necessarily lead to reliable equipment, processes and facilities.
- Entire organizations must share a new paradigm of reliability, and senior operations managers can make the maintenance paradigm shift happen.

The Art Of Stewardship (October/2009)

The longer we tolerate the lack of good stewardship of our businesses’ capital assets the more the attitude becomes “Why should I care?” People who are closest to the equipment and processes, closest to the facilities and machinery, are the ones who can make or break the competitive position of the business. Quite often, our challenge is to help everyone understand and appreciate that if we abuse or ignore equipment problems, we are potentially opening the door to the competition.

What we learned...

- Equipment stewardship means that all employees working with and on the “company’s

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equipment” have the responsibility to make sure that it operates properly and is not abused or damaged.

- Good stewardship is taking care of the assets that provide wages and make the business successful in the eyes of the customers, the employees and the owners or shareholders.

- A vision for good stewardship: “Our facilities, our processes and our equipment are critical to our business success. Our product quality, our employees’ safety, our equipment reliability and performance depend on how well we care for these assets. We provide the skills and knowledge necessary to empower our employees to be good stewards of everything they use to do their jobs.”

Looking ahead

NOW is still a time for maintenance...real maintenance that results in high-performing and reliable equipment, machinery and processes. Lessons learned from the past can be worthwhile as a vision for the future—*not as hindsight relative to what we should have done*. I’ve reminded you of these “lessons” from 2009 in the sincere hopes that we can make our businesses and America the most competitive, the most productive nation in the world. Let’s go for it!

Best wishes for a prosperous 2010. **MT**

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