

Develop Workers To Be Responsible, Motivated

Written by Mike Willard, Life Cycle Engineering Inc.
Sunday, 01 May 2005 00:00

Management within many maintenance organizations views its workforce as “resources” that provide the hands necessary to perform a function or to complete a task. In most instances, the use of these workers as resources has been well planned in order to obtain the maximum results, while little consideration has been given to the needs of the whole person.

This perception of workers has only increased the division between management and staff (salary and hourly) personnel. It also tends to place less thought or consideration on the motivation of the workers.

Development of workers must be considered and emphasized from the moment of initial employment. Attention must be placed on those areas that will prepare and motivate the worker to excel. This may include a better application of the skills and talents possessed by the individual or the assignment of additional responsibilities based on the individual’s technical skills. Assigning tasks of lesser capabilities and little, if any, responsibility will soon lead to poor quality of workmanship and job dissatisfaction.

Each organization should currently possess or create a vision statement for the development of its workers. This statement should plainly state how the organization will support the continuous improvement of its workforce at the group as well as the individual level.

The vision may include areas such as rewards and recognition for performance and the treatment of workers as individuals, with respect, and with dignity. Workers should be viewed as both teachers and students and should be given the freedom to act on their own (within company and management constraints).

Development challenges

A typical maintenance workforce is made up of highly skilled individuals. These workers (who have completed an organizational apprenticeship program and gained working experience with the equipment) represent a significant monetary investment by the company. This fact should force the organization to look upon the workers as a valuable asset, just as it normally considers a piece of equipment as a valuable asset. The workers too must be respected and continuously improved.

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Studies have shown that many workers are assigned tasks that require limited skills or involvement, even though the workers' potential for improvement may be somewhat greater. These studies indicate that many workers spend less than one-fourth of their time performing work compatible with their skills and capabilities. This type of management behavior soon leads to unmotivated workers who do not strive for additional responsibility or greater involvement in the organization.

Development opportunities

Motivation of maintenance workers must be the forethought of each manager. Workers should be developed steadily throughout their careers so the assigned work is interesting and challenging. They should always be provided with a sense of achievement.

The manager should plan to develop workers in both their skills and their responsibilities. Skills development may begin with acceptance into an apprenticeship program or by training to be a "multi-craft" worker.

As workers' skill levels increase, their levels of responsibility also should increase. This may begin with the requirement to inspect and report on one's own work and progress to instructing others in the performance of the tasks.

Workers must be hired and retained to meet the structural, process, and production needs of the organization. To accomplish this, the organization must develop and conduct training based on the industry, the processes used in production, the equipment in use (production and maintenance), and the maintenance and technical skills required to achieve the established efficiency and production-level requirements.

Many apprenticeship programs will provide the training required to acquire the necessary technical skills, but that training must be modified to include the requirements of the specific organization. Training which would provide for personal development also should be considered, even though the subject matter may not be technically related. Also, the training program should provide for the development of skilled, experienced workers into the position of trainers, transferring their skills and experiences to other workers or other work groups.

Development structure

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During the development of workers, their views or perceptions must be considered and monitored. Once selected for training, individuals may be placed in positions in which they are not comfortable and/or willing to accept. This may include the recognition placed upon them due to their selection, the increased exposure brought on by the training, the movement from centralized to decentralized decision making, or becoming a group leader vs a group member. Workers must be observed during development to ensure that any situation that may derail the process is addressed and a remedy is found as early as possible.

The environment in which the development of the worker occurs will have a large effect on the outcome. This development process should be viewed as a re-education process for the individual. Trends and habits, which have been practiced for years, will be altered. An environment must be presented which is conducive to learning and to helping change the attitudes of the workforce as they relate to training.

This does not mean that only the proper physical environment must be present. The proper mental environment will be just as, if not more, important. A healthy training environment will allow for raising the skill levels of the workers, raising the workers' confidence, raising the workers' responsibility and authority levels, developing team building traits, developing a positive attitude, and demonstrating technical achievements.

There is not one development program that will fit every organization or every individual. Each organization due to size, product, or internal and external factors must create its own unique program. Areas which should be considered during this creation include the length and depth of training required by each individual, the expectations upon completion of the training, subject matter to be taught, "pay-for-skills" expectations, levels of recognitions (local or higher), provisions for individuals who cannot or do not complete the training, and the pace of training (time frame).

The one area that will have the most effect on the outcome of the development plan is the individual himself. Some may see the training pace as too slow and become bored and uninterested. Others may see it as too fast paced and become anxious about their ability to keep up. Some may find the subject matter too difficult to comprehend, while others will find it too basic or elementary. Alternative methods of training must be considered in order to continuously motivate the individual.

Development approach

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The reason for the development of workers should be to create a trained and motivated workforce that can and desires to contribute to the efficiency and effectiveness of the organization. When workers are given responsibility, freedom to make decisions, and the power to carry through on their actions, they will be eager to contribute. When they are treated with respect and dignity, they will become more motivated to participate in organizational improvement activities.

The areas that should be included in the workers' development plan to increase this motivation should be extended from the shop floor up toward management and from management downward toward the workforce.

As the skills and capabilities of the workers continue to improve, the development plan, like the workers, should be under a continuous improvement process. This will ensure that the plan remains an effective tool in the development of the workforce.

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