

Uptime: Why Should We Care?

Written by Bob Williamson, Contributing Editor
Thursday, 01 March 2007 00:00



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Workplace organization and orderliness, "5S," housekeeping, tardiness, absenteeism, safety, labor shortages, equipment maintenance and reliability... What do these things have in common?

For starters, we have seen significant efforts to improve all of these areas of business for years. Sometimes, the results of these efforts go dormant, plateau or stop altogether. For example, many plants and facilities have had numerous initiatives to "clean up things " and put "things" in their places. And, many times, the results don't last. It's almost like cleaning up the workplace before the important customer or executive team visits. You know the drill-right? Well, I once met a CEO who, after a plant tour, would sit down in the conference room and point to the paint spots (usually yellow, red, and gray) on the soles of his shoes. He was trying to send a message that this type of "cleanup" is unnecessary and a fl agrant waste of time and money-besides, it ruined his shoes. "This place should look like this, or better, all the time!" he would say.

The same could be said of numerous "improvement programs"-they're kicked off with fanfare, lots of support, then go dark due to lack of followthrough or because other initiatives are competing for resources. Attitudes are shaped...

A long list of short-lived improvements shapes the attitudes on the plant-floor and tends to influence absenteeism and tardiness and, quite often, workplace safety: the poorer the attitudes,

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the higher the attendance problems and safety incidents. Equipment maintenance often follows the same track as these other "human-induced" workplace problems.

If we DON'T care, how can our companies or our businesses be successful?

How can we compete against off-shore, low-wage, low-productivity countries?

Standing by and watching equipment deteriorate to the point of failure in some plants leads to time in the break room for the operators and others. Thus, breakdowns are rewarded! Then, the "maintenance guys" have to work through break times and meals, and sometimes through weekends to get the equipment back up and running, knowing all along that the causes of the problems could have been prevented. Later the plant manager gets upset with maintenance guys being in the break room when it's no longer break time. Attitudes sink to new lows...Why should we care?

All of us have seen high turnover in certain departments in a plant. People just don't want to work there. Thus, they take the first opportunity to bid out, sign a job posting in another area of the plant or just quit and go elsewhere. Hostile working conditions can prevent formation of a stable experienced workforce in these areas and leave inexperienced junior employees struggling to keep things going during their shifts. Attitudes suffer...Why should we care?

The bottom line

I've heard it in too many plants over the past 30+ years: If the company doesn't care, why should we? Improvement initiatives often are stopped dead in their tracks when this kind of attitude prevails in a plant, a department or even in a crew.

"Who" is the "company" anyway and why should we care? Sure, it can be a building, the name on the top of the paycheck, the badge, the owners, the stockholders, the president, the CEO. On the other hand, all too often, the "company" is represented by the beliefs and behaviors of first-line supervisors, mid-level management, plant management groups and their leaders. Attitudes often are shaped by the "perceived company." We also should recognize that the "company" is a business, a financial entity measured by profit and loss, return on investment-a money-making machine in one form or another. Therefore, if the "company" does not make money, it ceases to exist. It's not an early retirement home for the "why-should-we-care club."

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Leadership shapes attitudes

I've seen many a successful operation built on a sound foundation of the "can do" attitudes of its staff-from the plant floor to CEO. They are great places to work primarily because of those attitudes, not because their facilities are new or that they pay more than others.

These companies also are remarkable for the "respect for people" that is shown throughout their organizations. They also seem to have a prevailing culture that abhors disorder, interruptions, defects and errors. Their workplaces are relatively clean, organized, well-lighted, comfortable and safe. Their equipment is reliable. People work together across departments-shift-to-shift, around the shop floor and with the "carpet dwellers" in the front offices.

As a whole, people in these types of successful operations are not afraid to work hard to get the job done right the first time. They also continually seek ways to make their work easier. Attitudes are great! Turnover is almost nonexistent. Absenteeism and tardiness rarely occur.

People really care around these places. If asked why, they would respond: "We ARE the company!" By the same token, union leadership would respond: "If there's no company there's no union!" They know how their job assignment fits into the big picture. They also know, and could show anyone who asks, how their performance would be measured and how that directly supports the key performance indicators of success for the company. These people work together to solve the little problems before they ever become big ones because, according to them, "We ARE the company."

Leadership at all levels in these companies sets the tone of the workplace. Be they first-line supervision, department managers, plant managers or executives, they behave in ways that reinforce the belief that "we're going to win or lose together." These leaders prevent barriers from forming or tear them down when they exist. They have high regard for everyone in their areas of responsibility. The golden rule "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you" is part of everyone's behavior and attitude in these successful operations. Simply stated, this respect for people leads to respectable bottom lines, respectable balance sheets and respectable financial statements.

Cleaning up

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You'll read it here and in the pages of other publications time and again. We are most likely in the worst era in U.S. history for attracting qualified maintenance workers. Manufacturers have been on a quest for more than a decade to get more young people interested in careers in manufacturing. But, a big part of our competitiveness struggle is built on a foundation that was set in place over 50 years ago. Unfortunately the nature of this struggle (and its associated body counts) have only been accentuated in recent weeks: Industrial jobs are nasty and plant closings lead to massive layoffs.

There is a continuing short supply of maintenance workers for many reasons, including those discussed in this article. Consider one more reason: chaotic "why-should-we-care" work environments. If "truth in help-wanted advertising" were being practiced, many want ads would look something like the following:

It's clear that we must find ways to clean up our image and promote it aggressively.

If we DON'T care, how can our companies or our businesses be successful? How can we compete against off-shore, low-wage, low-productivity countries?

If we DON'T care, how can we attract the best and the brightest to our plants and facilities?

If we DON'T care, how can our communities benefit from wages, tax base and community service work provided by successful companies and businesses?

Successful, sustainable operations are built around people at all levels of the organization who truly care. We all should care. It's contagious. If we don't, it shows. Sadly, that's contagious too!

bwilliamson@atpnetwork.com

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recovery, and, of course, the ability to restore data. While there are many advantages, equipment is the most significant and