Written by Norm Koslow, United States Postal Service Saturday, 01 May 2004 10:31

Craft employees keep postal service machines running.

How do maintenance managers, supervisors, engineering specialists, and support employees keep letter and parcel sorting automation equipment running and physical assets in good condition in the United States Postal Service? The simple and hackneyed sounding answer is that managers do not. Craft employees do.

There are more than 50 mail processing machines worth more than \$10 million in the Richmond, VA, Processing & Distribution Facility and 300,000 sq ft in the plant. These machines process 40,000 letters per hour.

The wear and tear on bearings, pulleys, belts, and gates demands constant predictive (PdM), preventive (PM), corrective (CM), and operational maintenance (OM). The alignment of optical character readers and ink jet printers is crucial to maintaining an overnight delivery score of 96 percent.

There are hundreds of associate offices, stations, and mail processing facilities in the Tidewater and central Virginia area. The world's largest address database resides in computers that communicate with all of the machines to make accurate delivery possible. This is just a small picture of the 24 hour, 365 day activities and assets that maintenance must oversee.

Craft employee training

Craft employees receive general electromechanical and electronic training and experience in trade schools or military service just to qualify to be on a hiring register. They attend specialized training in our technical training center in Norman, OK, for months. They have their hands on our machines every day; they see the shapes, sizes, and colors of mail pieces that our optical character readers see at holidays and sweepstakes mailing times. They are well prepared to do the job.

It all seems simple, and many maintenance management professionals know and practice this. But it takes more for this to be successful. Management cannot just hire, train, and turn craft employees loose, then expect them to "buy in." For buy-in to happen, management must "push down" to the lowest level—push down ownership, accountability, goals, the big picture, the good and bad news, communications, and recognition.

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The demographics of our employees reflect their maturity, with many close to retirement, as well as a sense of security, with great health insurance, leave benefits, and union representation. It would be easy for management to continue operations on a day-to-day basis knowing that momentum alone would get the job done, despite inefficiencies or employee shortcomings.

The Postal Service is perceived as a business; there is competition, and many corporate goals now include exceptional performance and austere measures. Many savings opportunities present themselves in more efficient delivery and customer service functions, and additional revenue generation. Maintenance must contribute to this endeavor and, as such, we have adopted this pushing down philosophy.

Machine ownership

The most important component is ownership—an individual's relationship with a particular machine. A maintenance employee is assigned to a machine and performs all the predictive and preventive maintenance on the nonproduction tour. He receives written performance reports on a daily basis that include jam rate, throughput, and other machine errors. Reports outlining machine performance are posted in high traffic areas for all to see.

Employees who have participated in this process have opened dialogues with production employees, asking for input and advice on optimizing equipment performance. Some production employees now do OM on assigned machines and have a bond with the employees who performed PM on them. There are exchanges between management and craft employees on opportunities to improve performance. Electronic technicians and mechanics not only see the fruits of their labor, but more importantly, they understand their role and how other operations are impacted by maintenance success or failure.

This ownership has raised the bar for employees and brought them to new heights. One can speak in terms of accountability when ownership is granted. Good performance and bad performance can be objectively measured and attributed to an individual. Corrections can be made, retraining is available, and results of these efforts are measurable. Some maintenance operations take this approach with ownership, but it does not end there.

Communication is vital

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Employees may think the answer to their question of "Why ownership?" is answered by the above reasons. But there is more to pushing down than just ownership. Communication of goals to employees is important. We have consistently done that, and it is great when an employee knows the throughput goal is 39,000/hr or less than 3 jams/10,000 mail pieces. These figures provide a barometer for machine performance.

But we also communicate the big picture goals to maintenance employees. Delivery, customer and employee satisfaction, and income, expense, and revenue generation—goals are related to maintenance employees on a daily basis; small gains are—celebrated, knowing that we have contributed positively. When maintenance employees—can speak with confidence on all aspects of our large business, then we have—developed great ambassadors for the company and opportunities for individual—success.

This retention of a broader knowledge of the Postal Service serves to enhance employee satisfaction and career development. When a maintenance person succeeds in other functions and creates a friendly bridge with other departments, all will benefit. So this ownership can go two ways—individuals owning machine performance and individuals owning a part of the organization.

The manager's desk is full of information that can be pushed down, received via e-mails from within and messages from outside parties. Topics include past performance, future goals in all functions, revenue opportunities, safety directives mandating training and drills or citing accidents and suspected terrorist acts, sales pitches for the latest technical or diagnostic equipment, training initiatives from corporate employee development departments, etc.

What knowledge does each employee need to protect the company? Is it too much to disseminate all of it or will employees suspect a cover up when items are withheld? It is unlikely that management would be lucky or skilled enough to hit on the exact amount of information for every employee to optimize use of this information.

So it is better to err on the side of too much. Employees will sift through what is presented and retain the greater part of what is important and plant—the seed in their minds for what can be held aside. Many employees will be able—to say they heard or read something based solely on their brief exposure, even—if the information is not digested thoroughly.

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Employees should be presented at all opportunities with information that paints the big picture, not just maintenance and technical data. All the buzzwords such as "outside the box" and "moving cheese" and whatever mantra the corporate libraries lend guide us to the same basic duty to our employees—communicate.

Recognition is fun

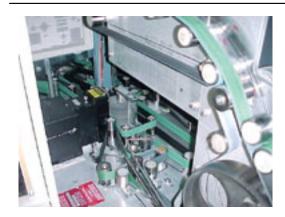
The last obvious part of pushing down is recognition. This is the fun and easy part. Decide what is appropriate and proceed in a timely manner. Many of the trinkets offered in incentive catalogs have some technical or useful aspect to them. Compact tools, flashlights, etc., with your maintenance mission statement, corporate logo, or safety reminder printed on the side are great for small accomplishments. If the bar is raised, elevate to gift certificates to a mall or restaurant and cash awards. Recognize the employees at the weekly stand up or safety talk.

This will complete the process of pushing down ownership, responsibility, expectations, and reward. The employee will buy in. **MT**

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An important component in the maintenance program

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