Despite well-established policies, procedures and recordkeeping, unexpected obstacles or snags often cause setbacks during scheduled or routine maintenance. In most cases, we've allotted adequate time to overcome these problems, allowing for safe and thorough completion of the task within a timeframe that doesn't hurt the up rate of the process. On the other hand, what about unplanned and unscheduled maintenance that cannot be predicted or prevented—*and the safety concerns that these situations may raise?*

A view from the trenches

A malfunction or miss operation can result in a pretty messy breakdown. Some people refer to this type of incident as "the wrench thrown into the works." It usually calls for the repair of equipment under a more stressful environment than usual—*meaning truly unfavorable working conditions* . More often than not, these breakdowns seem to occur at a particularly untimely, unsuitable, inconvenient hour of the day or night, typically when production management is demanding that the impossible be done yesterday.

Most of us working in the "trenches" of the industrial battlefield find ourselves in these situations from time to time. In dealing with unplanned maintenance, it is vitally important for Maintenance teams to adhere to all relevant safety guidelines and procedures supplied to them by their respective companies. The following reminders and strategies are offered simply as suggestions to help teams address future unplanned events.

Protect thyself. . .

Don't become a casualty! This is priority one. All too often, when unplanned maintenance pressures surround us, we tend to react before we assess. Not good. Instead, we need to more deeply assess an unplanned and/or catastrophic situation before we begin repair.

Protect yourself. Don your personal protective equipment (PPE). *Don't rush in—don't rush the job.*

Control the scene. . .

Power down the equipment and isolate all other energy sources (electrical, steam, water, hydraulics, etc.). *Lock out/Tag out!* Take a look around to ensure that no other troubles have occurred in the area as a result of the original failed equipment.

Once all is secure, begin assessing the trouble spot and the damage. Bring in as much of your Maintenance team as you can. The old saying that "too many cooks spoil the pot" doesn't apply to the Maintenance field. The more experienced, watchful eyes looking at the problem area, the better our understanding of the failure will be. Moreover, this approach also means there are more eyes to survey for any unsafe conditions that might still remain.

Identify and fix safely and quickly. . .

In most cases, after establishing a safe, secure and confident environment, a skilled Maintenance group can identify the failure quickly. And, because you have brought as many experienced Maintenance personnel on scene as you can, the fix can be evaluated and the repair time estimated at an accelerated rate.

Remember, the more minds the better. There is power in numbers. *There is safety in numbers.*

Now, disperse the team. Some should go get parts. Some should go get tools.

Most importantly, some should start cleaning. The area has to be clean before the work begins. This will eliminate risk of injury and remove any hindrances that could delay the repair.

When the work begins, the Maintenance team needs to keep talking to each other. Give a play-by-play analysis of what's going on. This type of continuous communication informs everyone on the work that is being done—*and the progression of that work*. Ongoing communication also can help eliminate errors that might inadvertently (and silently) occur. In the end, the job is completed safely and in a timely manner.

Don't overlook post-repair steps. . .

- Once the repair work is finished, clean the area well and reinstall all guards.
- Bring on power and energy sources slowly with everyone's knowledge of the steps taking place.
- Then, as standard practice would have it, all involved should begin to look, listen and feel.

The "Safe" team-oriented approach outlined here, coupled with continuous, quality communication, can help produce a timely and successful repair for your unplanned maintenance situations.

Final notes

Money is the bottom line for all businesses. A conscientious employer knows the value of a Maintenance professional. In the grand scheme of profit and losses, it is not cost-effective for a company to lose a highly qualified Maintenance team member because of an injury resulting from hasty reactions to a chaotic situation.

Take for example a Maintenance worker with 10 years experience. He/she gets hurt. What if the company loses that individual for a single day? Doesn't this hurt productivity—*especially when equipment is down*
? A losttime injury, though, could last for weeks. Consider what your company could lose in job knowledge and familiarity with the process and equipment while a Maintenance team member recovers from a lost-time injury. This calculation doesn't even begin to take into account the time and money invested in training and educating that experienced technician over the past 10 years. It's gone. Most employers understand the value of their Maintenance professionals. Some employees within a company may not. Don't let one person's ignorance coerce you into taking unnecessary risks.

Do not succumb to outside pressures when it involves your own safety or the safety of another employee. Protect yourself, your fellow workers and your company. Taking a "Safe," calm approach can help prevent casualties.

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