



Bob Williamson, Contributing Editor ***Confer (v): Present, talk, give, discuss, consult, put heads together, have a conversation...***

Conference (n): Symposium, forum, meeting, convention, consultation, summit, alliance...

Do you attend conferences? Do you share what you learn with those who can't attend?

Last month, the Society of Maintenance and Reliability Professionals (SMRP) held its 14th annual conference, in Birmingham, AL. This event turned out to be bigger and better than any previous year. Back in 1993, when I attended the first SMRP annual conference in Nashville, about 200 of us felt a sense of camaraderie, a new sense of belonging, with a bit of apprehension often associated with anything new labeled "maintenance." In subsequent years, our apprehension melted into an annual trek of renewal—that bit of maintenance and reliability "nutrition" we all need from time to time.

This year's SMRP conference attracted nearly 1,000 conferees from around the world. They were practitioners, leaders, educators, consultants, suppliers and publishers representing a total cross-section of capital-intensive businesses. Beyond the powerful keynote and general sessions, 50 technical sessions, a variety of post-conference workshops, numerous SMRP update sessions and several exceptionally interesting regional plant tours were offered. In addition, nearly 60 vendors displayed their products, services and publications, demonstrating and discussing the latest they had to offer. All in all, knowledge-seekers had a veritable buffet of practical, down-to-earth offerings from which to choose.

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The conference sessions provided particularly compelling insights in the areas of Manufacturing Process Reliability, Business and Management, Equipment Reliability, People Skills and Work Management. There was something of interest for everyone who attended. While most of the sessions provided case examples of improvement efforts and results, many others provided ideas: some inside the box, and some outside the boxes we find ourselves in.

One track (People Skills) was dominated by discussions on the imminent "Maintenance Skills Shortage." A number of presenters from multiple perspectives echoed the concern that most businesses have already encountered, or soon will—"where will our maintenance people of the future come from?" This excellent information now needs to be translated into positive proactive strategies back at the plant. Now is the time to fundamentally re-think our approaches to applying the proven maintenance and reliability tools and techniques that we have honed, polished and fine-tuned over the years. But, enough on that topic for now...

The 11th Annual Lean Management Conference by Productivity, Inc. also took place last month, in Alexandria, VA. There, more than 300 conferees got to choose from another strong slate of keynote and general sessions, over 26 "knowledge transfer" workshops and 20+ company case studies on the basics of Lean, Six Sigma and Total Productive Maintenance (TPM). Many presenters spoke of how they adapted, adopted and applied the fundamentals of the Toyota Production System or Lean Enterprise Management in their businesses with staggering results. Many company case studies explored the "Lean Journey," as well as significant results and pitfalls along the way.

While the primary emphasis at this conference was on "Lean Tools," many also spoke about engaging "Business Leaders" and "Teamwork" to achieve fast and sustainable results. A number of sessions dealt with the successes of team-based maintenance and reliability strategies or TPM. The central concept of "eliminating waste to reduce manufacturing cost," whether equipment- or work-process-related, permeated the sessions and workshops at this event.

At both conferences, the underlying emphasis from the keynote speakers was on PEOPLE: individuals, teams and leaders. At SMRP, Rocky Bleier, four-time Super Bowl Champ with the Pittsburgh Steelers, spoke on how ordinary people can become extraordinary achievers. Later, at the Lean Conference, professor Jeffrey K. Liker of the University of

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Michigan, author of the landmark book, *The Toyota Way*, stressed that "Toyota is especially good at developing exceptional people who want to learn and perform."

Both conferences also emphasized the need to standardize and stabilize processes (reliability) to eliminate waste and achieve sustainable gains. While equipment performance and reliability improvement was the theme at SMRP, system and work process stability through standardization was the theme at the Lean Management event. What strikes me (and the keynote presenters emphasized it at both conferences) is how none of this "improvement" is possible without engaging people at every level of the organization - and LEADERS have to step up to the challenge.

Whether improving equipment or systems and processes, people must learn and apply new ideas to make business results happen. Unfortunately, many companies and businesses are focused on implementing powerful maintenance and reliability tools or powerful "Lean" tools. If these tools are not embraced by the business AND by the people who should use them, they, too, become "wastes" that achieve neither lower costs nor improved performance. Thus, these tools may go the way of many of the improvement programs of the past three decades—unless they focus on business results and make sense to the people.

Suggestion to Leaders: Take what you learn from conferences and workshops you attend. "Confer" with the folks back at work who could not attend and learn what you learned. Hold a "mini-conference" to share the most applicable information. Then, look for problems, losses, wastes in your facility where these tools could be put to use to eliminate the problems, now and on into the future. **MT**

bwilliamson@atpnetwork.com