The months since the April Viewpoint have been very encouraging. Thanks to all of you who e-mailed your thoughts. Your interest, comments, and insight are very much appreciated. Similar thoughts from practitioners were published in Bob Baldwin's Uptime editorial in the July-August issue, and they agree with many who responded to my Producer Value article (MT 5/99, pg 26). It appears we are all on the same page.

Recent discussions with industry leaders make it clear that a process for equipment reliability management is emerging. The process seems industry independent and includes several generic principles. Those out in front of this movement recognize the necessity to express reliability issues in financial terms.

Interest, involvement, and drive from the top are characteristic of leaders. Leaders value people and recognize that people, not things, create value. They recognize that maintenance is not a stand-alone, stovepipe we run it, you fix it process but rather a vital, inseparable part of manufacturing. Some call it capacity management, others TPM. In truth, it is both and much more.

There is a growing recognition that equipment effectiveness, maintenance and reliability improvement, and the heavily promoted TLA (three-letter acronym) solutions are worthless unless they can conclusively demonstrate improvements in availability, production output, quality, and conversion cost. If you can't prove it, you don't get it--or, if you have it, it might be taken away.

Leaders identify deficiencies that detract from production objectives by occurrence, cost, and lost opportunity. The information leads to a prioritized action plan. Those following this process recognize that the mix and priority of deficiencies shift with changes in market conditions and completion of improvement initiatives. We're dealing with a moving target.

Several readers commented that corporate downsizing and managerial indifference had eroded competency in such vital areas as predictive monitoring, precision alignment, and balancing. I'll bet those indifferent managers's eyes would light up if we talk financial numbers.

Let's begin with the big picture. Authoritative sources report that North American manufacturing spends between $200 billion and half a trillion dollars a year on maintenance. An article in this magazine a couple of years ago asserted that over 60 percent of maintenance is preventable. A reduction of just 15 percent represents a minimum of $30 billion. Most industry leaders are going for 25 percent minimum--$50 billion at the lower estimate of maintenance expenditures.

With this huge opportunity, the big puzzle is why isn't the maintenance optimization industry humming along? Paraphrasing Pogo, the swamp sage, perhaps the enemy is us.

I suggest both the opportunity and means are totally within our control. Those who are complaining about not being listened to, and having their efforts hampered by people with the interest and attention span of a five-year-old, should think back to their first difficult problem. Most technical experts developed their expertise with interest, enthusiasm, curiosity, education, time, and observing a lot of perplexing problems up front and personal. We're now finding that technical expertise and knowledge that we're doing things right isn't enough. The value of our efforts must be proven in thousands of dollars.

What are the barriers that keep reliability experts from learning the skills necessary to connect technical results to improvements in production effectiveness and business performance? I suggest the conditions are exactly the same as when today's reliability experts viewed their first frequency spectrum, balanced their first fan, repaired their first pump, performed their first shaft alignment. Today there is an advantage--recognition that technical knowledge must be reinforced with compelling financial justification demonstrating value. Think of your first complex problem. Everyone recalls being confused, uncertain, and more than a bit inadequate. What did you do? You learned and added to your knowledge. That's called experience.

Today we're faced with another challenge. Have you asked yourself what are the top five concerns of your plant manager? More importantly, how can you contribute to the manager's success and security in those areas? Find out, learn how, gather experience, and increase your personal satisfaction and worth. MT

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