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Perhaps one of the most over-used and abused phrases we've been hearing in the past 2 years is, "the new economy." This vague, ill-defined reference speaks to the rise of Internet-based companies, fast-paced technology companies that do not concern themselves with concepts like profit but rather focus on development and revenue. Change is not the buzzword that drives the new economy; it's a way of doing business. Not just some change, but change all of the time, rapid and dramatic.

Most people involved with the maintenance function, a function that is slow to accept change and innovation, have viewed all of the talk of the new economy like outsiders. It's like watching a parade through a store window. It's bright and colorful, but there's something between you and it that makes it seem less real.

There are a number of reasons for this conundrum. For all of the hype of the new visions toward management and leadership, the maintenance business is a work-based business (something that is often foreign to Internet startup companies). For all of the innovation in the field, the rise of computerized maintenance management systems and other tools, there has been little or no change in the core business that is maintenance. The role of leaders in maintenance is often the same as it was two decades ago: maintain the assets of the company to the maximum capability for the least amount of money.

As one maintenance manager put it to me, "Computers can tell you when to work on something, but in the end, turning a wrench is still turning a wrench." It's hard to argue with someone who is dead-on right—at least at a tactical level.

So what is different with the rise of the new economy? For one thing, it has accelerated companies' expectations of maintenance doing much more for much less cost. As the trickle of technology reaches maintenance departments, they are expected (as if by magic) to be able to do a great deal more with these tools. There is a perception that if personal computers are delivered, if infrared gear or handheld data collectors are provided, productivity will increase enough to offset the costs.

In reality, technology is a tool that can allow a maintenance manager to reduce costs. What drives that, however, is not the tools.

It's the leadership.

What the new economy is doing is forcing more traditional maintenance managers to alter their roles to become process managers and financial control managers. They are expected to understand their business at a tactical hands-on level, while at the same time understanding how to set a strategy for maintenance operations and drive to that strategy.

This expectation is not necessarily a bad thing, despite the grumblings of some managers who resist any or all change. Present-day leaders in maintenance have to look at the new tools they can lay hands on as only part of an overall solution. It is up to them to map out a means to implement these solutions, to leverage the tools and technology so that they can achieve the savings expected or even demanded by upper management.

From a leadership perspective, contemporary maintenance managers must have a full understanding of the processes that drive their business. They must comprehend the technology that they have, and what's available. When they view technology, the new leaders in our business must be able to see not just the tools, but the way to make the tools work. They must see not threats to their jobs or pains in their rumps, but means for them to alter their processes to make a difference in their jobs.

More important, maintenance leaders who want to be successful in bringing technology to bear against their problems must have the capability to lead and develop their people along with the processes changes and technology. They must be able to communicate what their vision looks like to the rank and file, and more important, they must know the best way to deal with resistance to change.

We've all seen new technology tools fail because they were implemented poorly. But the new economy demands change, constant change. Being able to wrap one's hands around the new tools, and to find ways to implement those new tools and change the supporting processes, is critical.

So where does this take us? To a new breed of professional maintenance manager

who is a technology leader and a pragmatic business person first—a hands-on maintenance person second. It will also mean changes in our business that many have longed for, a potential for an influx of tools and techniques that will possibly change the concept of wrench-turning forever. **MT**

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