

Getting Ready for an Invitation to the Big Table

Written by Tony Kuester
Monday, 01 September 2003 12:45

Why don't we get invited to the big table very often? Perhaps it is because:

- We speak a different language.
- We see things differently (even though we are looking at the same thing).
- We judge things technically, without the "business point of view."
- We fail to explain why maintenance and reliability are crucial to business success.
- When we are invited, we tend to beg off because we have "real" work to do.

The perception in the end is that whenever we are invited, we "don't have a clue."

I have heard over and over the lament by fellow compatriots in the field of maintenance, reliability, and physical asset management that "we are not listened to by upper management," that "we are never invited to the big table."

Unfortunately, I have heard from upper management the refrain that not only is it difficult to convince operations management to invite maintenance management to the big table, but also that whenever maintenance management is invited, it comes to the meetings without a clue as to why it was invited, or why it is there.

So what is happening? And what should we do about it?

First, it seems to me that we do not know the "business side" of our own business—maintenance—well enough to market ourselves and sell our value to the organization. Can you answer these questions: What is the value we provide? What is it worth? How do we measure it? What is the business case—the ROI—for maintenance and reliability?

We claim maintenance and reliability provides a competitive advantage in the marketplace. But we seem to have a difficult time quantifying the value of that advantage. Most of our maintenance metrics are focused only on maintenance and reliability. They are relevant and necessary, but they tell us only how well we are managing maintenance.

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Where are the metrics that demonstrate the ROI of maintenance relative to the products and/or services that our companies provide? How, for example, do we demonstrate that as a consequence of investing a certain amount of money into maintenance and reliability, the business gets a positive return? How do we demonstrate reduced operational costs, increased productivity, fewer losses, increased sales, or satisfied customers?

This is tough to do. Much of the argument is philosophical; very little of the argument is demonstrable via quantifiable financial measures. So it is natural that at the senior management level, maintenance is viewed as a cost, not an investment. No one doubts it is necessary, but from the business perspective, the perceived measure of maintenance effectiveness is “cost per unit of production.”

So the primary management strategy regarding maintenance is cost control. That is how most business managers view maintenance. And, unfortunately, that is how many maintenance managers view maintenance. So it is not surprising that upper management, who views its role more toward strategic planning, operations management, and optimization of profit, views maintenance as a small part of the whole.

But it is nevertheless true that maintenance and reliability is a critical part that fits into the core of most businesses. But to sell that to upper management we must change our ways.

That is one of the reasons concerned maintenance and reliability leaders formed the Society for Maintenance & Reliability Professionals (www.smrp.org). One of its mission objectives is to support maintenance and reliability as an integral part of business management.

It is going to be a hard sell, and will take perseverance and persistence to sell the message that maintenance and reliability are investments that lead to a competitive edge in the marketplace. It will be difficult to change the image of maintenance from that of a technician to that of a professional and businessman.

The most critical element in that transformation will be you, the individual; you must change your own mindset and knowledge of business. We must learn the business of business as well

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as the business of maintenance and reliability.

We must become the best-of-the-best in our endeavors and we must become equally so in the business arena.

Join with us at SMRP to make sure that when you are invited to the big table, you are ready to take your place as a full participant, and be invited back. **MT**