

The Fundamentals: How To Introduce Accountability Into A Maintenance Organization

Written by Raymond L. Atkins, Contributing Editor
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You can't just assume when it comes to what's being done and how correctly.

Accountability has become a popular topic in this country, due mainly to recent examples of what can happen without it. From Wall Street to Main Street and at all levels in between, the need for oversight has made itself very apparent.

Where there are written standards, there's a need for those in authority to be sure that those standards are met. Where there are rules, there's an obligation by management to see that they are followed each and every time. Where there are established procedures, there's the necessity to install an oversight protocol that will monitor the process to ensure the correct methodology is being employed each and every time. And where there are none of these? It's the responsibility of good managers to put oversight systems in place. Managers who don't have such systems and just assume that everything is going according to plan could be in for some very unpleasant surprises.

Bluntly put, when it comes to industrial maintenance, if you didn't see it happen with your own eyes, there's a possibility that it happened incorrectly—or *didn't happen at all*. Keep this simple, yet very important, fact in mind: Some component of human error is involved in most process failures. (When the mill falls silent, you don't want to find yourself the last one standing.)

Positive trumps negative

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One of the big problems with introducing “accountability” into any maintenance organization is that, for many years, organizations have equated the term with blame. I have conducted maintenance meetings where, at the first mention of the “a” word, the technicians crossed their arms, slumped in their chairs and began intently examining the wall over my shoulder. The general feeling at those times seemed to be that “The Man” (that would be me) was about to stick it to them once again.

To be sure, there’s some merit to assessing blame when procedures are blatantly circumvented, when safety rules are irresponsibly broken or when the work is outright shoddy. But if you want to see your maintenance reality shift from an us/them mentality toward a true team-oriented organization, the less negativity you associate with the concept of accountability, the better.

As with anything new in an organization, acquainting your maintenance department with the importance of positive accountability should be done at a measured pace—*that’s one step at a time*. If you’ve been lax in the accountability department, it would be a poor idea to begin your new regimen by firing the next technician who does something wrong. That would definitely set the wrong tone and would virtually guarantee that your new accountability initiative would fail.

It’s much better to discuss the changing paradigm with the organization in positive terms. Perhaps the best avenue would be to begin with a definition, like the following, that sums things up nicely: “To be accountable is to be responsible to someone for some action.” This is an excellent definition in that it explains the idea of accountability in simple, non-threatening terms. It lets your personnel know that you are asking them to stand behind their work; that you are holding them to the same high standard to which all professionals should be held; and that there will be consequences if they fail to meet this standard of performance.

At the same time, your team should be made aware that the underlying reason for accountability in maintenance is “process improvement”—*not punishment*. If we can rule out what didn’t go wrong in a given process failure, we’ll have a much better chance of determining what really happened and why.

Build on the concept

Once you have introduced the concept of accountability to your maintenance staff, the next step is to review and edit your PM, Lube and PdM procedures so that they have a component of accountability built into them. To begin this process, you’ll want to be sure each procedure has a place on the work order—*printed or electronic*—where the technician can sign off that the

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work has been performed according to the specified procedure and up to the required standard. This is a critical step. Your maintenance professionals must sign their work. You can't have accountability without it. A technician's signature on the work order is your assurance that the work was done as specified.

At this point, we should talk about the specificity of your written work processes. The reason for this is that you cannot hold your technicians to a rigorous standard of performance if they—or *you*—don't know what that "standard" is.

Additionally, even if your maintenance professionals do know the standard, you can't hold them accountable if there's no documentation indicating that your expectations were communicated to them. In other words, if you intend to hold a maintenance employee accountable for his/her work, you must be able to prove that he/she knew what you wanted. This is why it is critical for your written procedures to be specific.

A work order that states "lubricate machine A" is next to useless: It conveys little information. If the machine is not lubed properly, it will be difficult to hold any employee accountable with this work order, even if a technician had signed it. If one or several lube points were missed and a machinery failure resulted, an employee could rightfully point out he/she hadn't been properly prepared for the job, the instructions were unclear and, anyway, he/she didn't know there was a grease fitting behind that steel plate. The correct way to document this procedure is by specifying where the lube points are, what type of grease is needed and how much lubricant is required. Safety requirements should be noted and cleanup and housekeeping issues addressed. When you have a specific job plan, you have a document that an employee can be held to.

Proper oversight

Once your written procedures—including *planned corrective work and emergency work orders*—are able to convey the proper information to your maintenance professionals, the oversight portion of the equation begins. Probably the best (and most common) method of oversight is to have the maintenance supervisor or lead man spot-check portions of each job that's being conducted during a maintenance cycle. (Although this type of oversight also could be performed by a senior employee, union restraints might keep such a method from working in some settings.) Regardless of who performs the actual inspection, this is the same approach taken by the Internal Revenue Service each year after tax season has passed: It doesn't audit every income tax return—*just a high enough percentage to convince most taxpayers that it would be a bad idea to claim a*

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pet as a dependent.

The same methodology holds true during your maintenance cycle.

By checking a lube point here and a torque spec there, a weld penetration this time and a bearing clearance the next, your line supervisors can subtly communicate to the crew that all work is subject to random inspection, that all work is important and, thus, it would be to the technicians' benefit to be sure that all work is performed to company specification.

Periodically, a job should be inspected in its entirety. These jobs should be selected for inspection at a random interval to be determined by management. The codicil here is that each technician on the crew should undergo a complete inspection of a job at least once during an inspection cycle. If you have 20 technicians on a crew and the inspection interval is one per week, each of your maintenance professionals knows there is a 100% likelihood that sometime during the next 20 weeks, their work will be looked at in its entirety—*from lockout to cleanup.*

A note of caution is in order at this point: You must be certain that your random inspection selections are just that. If employee A is always inspected during the ninth week of the cycle, it won't take long for him/her to pick up on the pattern. In turn, A will develop the tendency to do a better job in the ninth week. I'm not implying he/she would be dishonest to do so. It's just human nature to do a better job if you are being watched. But we don't want to see the caliber of A's work when he/she knows we'll be looking. What we want is to see the quality of the work the rest of the time. So watch for any scheduling patterns that may be developing and try to avoid them. Furthermore, if appropriate personnel are available to do it, this complete job-performance evaluation should be conducted by someone other than the employee's usual supervisor. That way, if re-work is called for, there will be less potential of straining an existing work relationship.

Once all of these checks and balances are in place, you will be in the position to apply the concept of accountability to your next process failure. Yes, you'll still have process failures—*although the longer you practice accountability, the less likely these will become over time, and the ones you do suffer will be less severe.*

But when the machines stop running, you will still need to try to determine what happened. The difference this time will be that in place of the usual teeth-gnashing and finger-pointing, you'll have facts and objectivity on your side.

If the work order on a failed machine says the bearing was greased but the component is found

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to be dry, that is a fact. In such a case, there's a chance the technician signed off on work that he/she did not carry out. Whatever management decides to do at this point, it will be in a stronger position with the documentation than without it.

On the other hand, if the work order on the failed machine indicates the bearing was greased and it has indeed been lubed, that, too, is a fact. Thus, the assumption must be made that the work was performed according to spec—*so something must be wrong with the specification*. Perhaps the wrong type of grease was used or the bearing was under-rated for the application. Maybe too much grease was called for in the work order. Whatever the problem turns out to be, it will be easier to solve if you can rule out employee error.

Accountability is about failure analysis and subsequent failure prevention. It's about solving problems. It's about keeping the machines running and the orders filled. And it's about time you applied it to your processes. **MT**

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