National Association of Institutional Linen Management

Continuous Improvement: Question...Experiment...See!

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Mr. Stepness will be a featured speaker at our Reno Conference!

One of the dynamics that I have noticed repeatedly in operations over the years is the lack of ongoing experimentation with how things are done. We all have a tendency to look at a complex process once, make a decision about how it is done; and then rarely, if ever, review that decision. Most importantly we stop questioning, experimenting and really seeing.

Some Possible Questions:

Do you have performance standards that everyone understands? When was the last time they were reviewed?

Do individual operators in your organization know how well they are doing and what kind of contribution they are making?

Do they know how well they are doing and what kind of contribution they are making? Do they know this based on objective information or just subjective opinion? What are you providing in the way of performance evaluations and what are these reviews based on?

When was the last time you reviewed the techniques used for feeding, folding and packaging goods? Do your better performers have superior techniques and methods that could be shared with others?

Are goods handled in the laundering process unnecessarily? The lowest cost way to do anything is to do it right the first time. Do you find yourself re-sorting or re-handling goods on the finishing floor, when they could have been done right the first time?

What about rewash? Does it come back to the floor sorted or does it have to be sorted again? Does it make sense to do it differently?

Are washcloths washed with towels in your Tunnel Washer to avoid plastering in system dryers? How much does it cost to separate them in the finishing department and is the double handling the best way of doing it?

Are you laying out sheets and other items prior to finishing? Why? Is there a better way?

Are folders on the back of your ironers matched to appropriate processing needs?

Are you finishing the right goods at the right workstation? Some small piece folders, for example are easy to change from product to product while others take so long to set up for a different product that they lend themselves to long runs of the same item.

Are you hand-folding items that could be machine folded? Are you machine-folding items that could be hand folded and free up precious machinery capacity?

What about plant layout? When is the last time you took a good look and redesigned plant flow or components thereof?

Are you using relatively inexpensive conveyors and other material handling devices to save time, space and effort?

How about scheduling and product flow? Are all work areas consistently full of product to be finished or are you experiencing frequent and costly product shortages at the various work stations?

When is the last time you took a serious look at ergonomics at the various workstations and plant in general?

Your insightful answer to any one of these questions could provide a significant producing improvement with a commensurate cost savings.

Perhaps the reason we seldom recognize the opportunities in front of our eyes and why so called ‘out of the box thinking’ is so rare is that we just can’t see what is in front of us so we never question it. ***One of the misconceptions that we share is the belief that we can really see what is happening with our eyes***. The truth is that we are very limited in our ability to see the whole picture for three basic reasons.

We Only see One Aspect at a Time:

The first reason is that we can never see anything in its entirety since we can only view one plane or aspect of a three-dimensional object at one time. There is no debating this reality and yet paradoxically we believe that if we see one side of something we see it all. We believe that we know what is and what it means. Neither of these commonly held notions is true and we can never see a three dimensional object much less a complex process from a single point of view.

For example, we can measure performance of an individual over a short period of time and most of the time they know they are being observed so the observation itself is flawed. Very few of us have a clear picture of what anyone’s performance is over a long period of time. Attempting to make sense of or modify someone’s performance is very difficult without better tools for seeing. Putting all of the images together into a coherent picture is very difficult by oneself.

Our Sight is filtered:

Secondly, we see things not as they are but as we are. We see things based on our cultural and environmental bias and /or training. It is as if we are wearing colored goggles that give a peculiar tint to everything based on these biases. We all know that a sales manager responsible for the growth of the business will have a very different view of delivering on the promises made to a client than a production manager who is responsible for execution of those promises or an account who is concerned with the bottom line.

We See What We Are Looking For:

Finally we see what we expect to see. That is, we tend to see what we are looking for. We have all experienced the impact of slight-of-hand illusion that uses this tendency to mask movement, or we have seen art or been exposed to exercise which intentionally use the principle to confuse and amaze us.

The truth is that we want to be right about past judgements and so we see what will confirm our point of view and fail to see, deny or dismiss that which is contrary. It wouldn’t be so bad if we fully realized that we can’t see, and yet we are absolutely certain that we see and most importantly that we understand the meaning and import of what is seen.

For example, the way most of us keep score in our operations is through pounds per operator hour or if we are very advanced we use some form of a spreadsheet program that may provide a little more detail or visibility. And so we are largely left with our subjective opinion of how it is rather than objective information that provides a clearer picture.

We can’t change what we can’t see. Seeing differently is the essential first step, the necessary push we need to develop the desire to change. The production environment is a dynamic, complex, integrated system. Having objective information on the effect of change encourages additional effort to improve. This upward spiral of seeing how we can do more with less is what efficiency is all about. The opportunity for continuous improvement is just that...continuous.

Question Everything Always:

There are two techniques and/or tools that we recommend for our clients so that they begin to open their eyes to see. The first of these is to question everything always. Most of the opportunity in our operations comes from the recognition of where and how we are wasting energy and time.

There are, of course, an infinite number of solutions to any problem. Yet once we have settled on one that seems to work ‘pretty well’, or is better than the one we used before; we leave it in place, -sometimes for years- without ever questioning the issue or process again to determine if there is an even better solution or method. It is highly unlikely that we will ever have the best solution to a problem or process. This is the underlying principle that makes continuous improvement a possibility.

Substantial and permanent improvement in our operations will come from recognizing the need to constantly question everything and daring to experiment with change. Attempting to do the same thing we are currently doing ‘better or harder’ will not lead to substantial and sustained improvement. We encourage you to begin to question and then experiment with everything always.

Productivity Measurement

Getting an accurate picture of what is really happening in our operations is impossible without some method of seeing in more detail and seeing more details at the same time. Consequently, our end recommendation is to install and use some form of individual incremental productivity measurement tool that allows you to see, in great detail, how well everyone is performing over time.

These tools are just now beginning to be available and the opportunities they offer your operation are enormous. Manufacturers of finishing equipment are beginning to provide microprocessors on their products that report individual results in real time. Relational databases are being introduced to the industry that allow the user to collect individual incremental data on any or all activities in the plant. The best of these products offer virtually unlimited capability to see your operation from any angle you select in relation to any other aspect of the operation for as long or as short a time span as you desire.

These products can create very detailed and accurate pictures of your operation, which is impossible to see with traditional tools like observation, spreadsheets or pounds per operator hour. The illusion that we can see what is happening in our operations based on pounds per operator is like trying to train a football team based on the score in the newspaper as opposed to having ‘game film’. Both the coaches and the players must be able to see how well they are doing in great detail to see what is necessary to change.

Organizations that are using continuous improvement technology and questioning everything are recognizing new opportunities daily. They are dynamically changing their operating results and are reporting very dramatic improvements in productivity that often range between 10% to 25% in their first year! Perhaps most importantly, they are having a great time doing it.

Continuous improvement in the process and performance of a function is the joy of work. ***Doing it great is a great experience!*** The opportunity to be the best is only possible when we begin to question, to see and have the courage to experiment. Organizations, which follow this prescription and continuously improve, will not only prevail; they will have the best time doing it.