

The Performance Paradox

By John Stepnes

Running a laundry efficiently and effectively entails two principles that appear to be contradictory on first glance, but are really the heart of the laundry or any other process where energy is exchanged.

1. "The lowest cost way to do anything is to do it right the first time."
2. "It is impossible to do anything so well that it can't be done better."

The only way to accomplish the former principle, while recognizing the opportunity still available with the latter is to measure and then document activity accurately and objectively.

Finally, we must examine the data collected, share the results generated, address the questions raised and continue to actively search for and experiment with better and better ways of accomplishing the task.

Continuous Improvement is not just a Graduate School slogan but the very real opportunity in front of us ALL Ways. Activated Attention on what is happening right here--right now is the energy that makes constant improvement possible.

Question Everything

One of the dynamics that we 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 to be done; and then rarely, if ever, review that decision. Most importantly we stop questioning, experimenting and really seeing.

Some Possible Questions:

- ♦ When was the last time you made an overview of your Operation matching product mix and hourly task to equipment and staff available?
- ♦ Do you have performance standards that everyone understands? When was the last time they were reviewed? What methodology did you use to review them?
- ♦ Do individual operators in your Organization 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?
- ♦ Are you processing in accordance with accepted standards for quality including verification of the wash process through test pieces, separation of clean and soiled linen including barriers and air handling during the process and the separation and handling of clean and soiled linen in the transportation and storage process?



- ♦ What about quality standards? Does everyone in the Plant know the standards, have objective examples of same and are results audited by product and individual?
- ♦ 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? 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 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 productivity improvement with a commensurate cost savings and quality improvement.

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.

1. We never see anything in its entirety; we only see one aspect of anything at a time. Watching one operation or operator means we are missing all others.
2. Our vision is filtered, we tend to see things through our own biases based on memory, influenced by culture, experience and training.
3. We tend to see what we expect to see. We confirm what we are looking for.

The truth is that we want to be right about past judgments 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 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 not possible that we will ever have the best solution to a problem or process, since every energy transfer involves heat loss. 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 or sustained improvement. We

encourage you to begin to question and then experiment with everything always.

Measuring Results

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 second recommendation is to install and use some form of individual incremental productivity and quality audit measurement tool that allows you to see, in great detail, how well everyone is performing over time.

These tools are now available and the opportunities they offer your operation are enormous. Relational databases are beginning to be used by the Industry, allowing the user to collect individual incremental data on any or all activities in the plant. The best of these products offers 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, recognizing and rewarding the contributions their associates are making while improving quality and creating solid customer relations based on trust and reliability.

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.

John D. Stepnes is President of John D. Stepnes Inc, a Laundry Consulting Company specializing in Plant design and Operations. Mr. Stepnes has a very broad and diversified experience base in the Industry including Plant Management, Senior Management, Equipment Sales and Plant design and has for the past 15 years been a Consultant to the Industry."

Email: produceit@bellsouth.net