MANAGING TODAY'S TECHNICIANS
Insights on building a productive, happy team in your maintenance shop.

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Everyone knows that today’s technicians need to know how to do much more than turn a wrench. With trucks turning into sophisticated equipment resembling computers on wheels, plus increasing emphasis on uptime, controlling costs, and safety and compliance, it’s an ever-more-demanding job.

But what of the upper-level managers who are responsible for making sure the company has the right technicians in place, that they’re properly trained, that they’re operating at peak efficiency, and that the shop and the trucks are operating at the highest level of efficiency and safety?

What does it take to be a successful modern maintenance manager — and to be ready for what the future brings?

People vs. equipment

As a technician, you probably deal mostly with equipment. But as a manager, a big part of your job is dealing with people.

“In the early days of my career as a technician turned manager at a union shop in Cincinnati, Ohio, I learned quite quickly that I could not lead by force. Doing so just caused more pushback and more headaches,” explains Randy Obermeyer. He’s terminal manager for Batesville (the casket manufacturer) in Batesville, Ind., which operates some 1,000 pieces of equipment from light-duty to Class 8. “I discovered that managing technicians was like being married, and that it needed a give-and-take relationship. At the end of the day, they want the same things as I do … to be heard, be needed, and appreciated."

Batesville’s culture, he says, “requires us to build an ‘army of problem solvers.’ Instead of answering a question from an associate when they are facing a dilemma, we ask them what they think should be done. Making them think for themselves is crucial for their development and fulfilling a top item on the ‘Pyramid of Needs,” he explains, referring to Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, a well-known psychological theory of human motivation. Top items on that list include concepts such as esteem and self-actualization.

At U.S. Xpress, a major truckload carrier based in Chattanooga, Tenn., Senior Vice President of Maintenance Gerry Mead says the company’s entire management team is going through “The 4 Disciplines of Execution,” a goal-driven management program from the folks at FranklinCovey. The concepts extend into the maintenance shop as well.

“By allowing them to set goals and provide commitments as a group, they can feel part of a ‘Wildly Important Goal’ [the term used in the 4 Disciplines program], and they can see the needle movement,” Mead says. “We have scoreboards posted and everyone can see if we’re winning or losing. Any time you’re playing a game or involved in something and there’s a score kept, you always want to know you’re winning. People want to help move the needle.”

Training and education is an important part of the motivational equation.

“Training is an operating cost you cannot afford not to have,” says Terry Clouser, who spent 27 years with UPS and has provided

Technicians can easily find tools and equipment in Batesville’s shop, saving time and frustration.
LEADING THE LEAN SHOP MOVEMENT

Randy Obermeyer has made a name for himself in the industry as one of the first maintenance managers to adopt Lean for maintenance management.

Obermeyer got his start as a school bus mechanic, moving on to manage one of the largest Ryder maintenance facilities in the country before moving back to his hometown of Batesville, Ind. Today he is terminal manager for the private fleet run by Batesville (a company that sells caskets and other products to funeral professionals).

Batesville has more than 1,000 pieces of equipment across the country, from light-duty through Class 8. Obermeyer is responsible for overseeing purchase and maintenance for all of it.

Lean was one of the company’s core principles, so Obermeyer set out to figure out how to apply it to buying and maintaining equipment.

Lean got its start in the manufacturing business. Coined to describe Toyota’s business during the late 1980s, it revolves around tools and principles to maximize customer value while minimizing waste.

In simple terms, Obermeyer says, Lean is using data to help drive waste out of the business, whether that’s wasted time, excess inventory, waiting time, etc. It didn’t seem quite so simple when he first started working at Batesville, he admits. While the company trained him in the principles, it took some work to adapt concepts that came out of a manufacturing environment so they fit a maintenance environment.

However, he finally realized that the same principles used to figure out how to reduce the time it takes to weld a certain piece of metal onto a casket could also be used, for instance, to make a preventive maintenance inspection and service more efficient.

One of the keys, he says, is getting away from your desk. “Many modern managers, like me in my early days, manage from their seat, comfortably placed behind their computer screen, barking orders at their supervisors and technicians,” he says. “The Lean leader spends a good deal of time in the Gemba (where the work is being done) and asking ‘why’.”

As the chairman of the S.2 (Tire & Wheel) Study group of the Technology & Maintenance Council of the American Trucking Associations, Obermeyer initiated a Recommended Practice (RP) to be developed to guide others on how to use Lean tools in this arena.

In a session at TMC’s 2016 Annual Meeting in Nashville, Tenn., on March 3, Obermeyer will moderate a Hands-on Lean Problem Solving Workshop for Maintenance Operations, which will be led by a Lean expert.

Mixing generations

All this is particularly important as the modern maintenance manager adjusts to attributes typical of younger generations — to better manage the expectations of the young people who it is so important to bring into your shop today.

When asked how hard it is to find technicians with the needed skills for today’s shop, Bruce Stockton says, “There are no technicians to find.”

Stockton, vice president of fleet services at Kenan Advantage Group in North Canton, Ohio, says fleets today must develop their own technician base, training, educating, and investing in them.

“Identifying computer-savvy personnel who love equipment, enjoy the diagnostic challenge and know how to follow a process and exhibit patience in diagnostics are key attributes of finding the right techs,” he says.

Clouser agrees, observing that there are young people out there who get personal satisfaction in troubleshooting, diagnostics, and repairing problems. “There are competitive people who like this type of work...”
and can’t sit in an office all day. These are the individuals we need to search out and attract to the industry.”

However, maintenance managers we spoke with commented that while these younger technicians may be whizzes with diagnostics and software, traditional maintenance may not be their thing.

One way to address these generational differences is to have techs work in teams. “There’s a difference between smart and wise,” says Mike Delaney, president and CEO of WheelTime, a network of nearly 200 repair and maintenance shops in the U.S. and Canada. “The increased use of technology and electronics to operate and maintain vehicle systems has led to advantages for multi-generational maintenance teams. On average, younger techs have a faster grasp of newer tools and online training systems for the new vehicles and technologies, while more experienced techs make great mentors and partners.”

In 2014, WheelTime launched “Total Tech,” a series of online training and certification modules using tools and focus inspired by the SuperTech competition put on annually by the American Trucking Associations’ Technology & Maintenance Council. WheelTime was one of the organizations that worked with TMC to develop the FutureTech national student technician competition.

“We believe there are advantages to having the different generations represented in our shops,” says George Arrants, director of training and recruitment for WheelTime. “Many companies, however, are stating they want to hire experienced techs, which could just be a short-term fix. We’re finding that hiring a qualified entry-level tech from a quality program and most importantly allowing them to grow within the organization, is more cost-effective.”

“Training is an operating cost you cannot afford not to have.”

— Terry Clouser, Fleet Advantage

Eric Peterson, vice president of maintenance at Burr Ridge, Ill.-based Dillon Transport, emphasizes the importance of communication and of understanding how to work with differing generations. “We’re getting a lot of kids out of schools that are very computer-literate, very willing to learn, but they’d rather communicate via text. They need that pat on the back more often than the mechanics of 20 years ago.”

In the shop

Part of managing your technicians is making sure they have the information, processes and tools they need to work efficiently, effectively, safely and comfortably.

Vehicle lifts or pits can allow technicians to easily get underneath a vehicle instead of lying on their backs. Lighting, climate control, access to the proper tools, and just keeping up with the technology for the shop are also key.

At the Erb Group’s New Hamburg, Ontario, facility, a new worker-friendly shop was designed for optimum productivity, efficiency and safety. It includes some thoughtful and innovative features, including two extra rows of glass panels in the roll-up doors on the east side of the shop that take advantage of the available sunlight. The shop lighting is all LED and the walls are painted white for better illumination.

McDonald says the Don Hummer Trucking shop, about eight years old, is relatively new, and is kept extremely clean because it’s easier to turn trucks and trailers through faster. It has heated floors and over-width
Training and education are vital to help technicians feel fulfilled in their jobs and to keep them up to date on new technology — including alternative fuels, as in this Dillon Transport shop.

doors. All tech has door openers, which allows them to do a better job of keeping the heat inside during the winter and saves time because techs aren’t waiting for a door to open.

After doing time studies and movement analysis, Hummer rearranged the parts room to make it more user-friendly, allowing for a quicker turn time on PMs and other routine maintenance.

“We always buy the latest equipment we can as far as computers,” McDonald says. “Our trailer shop’s got scissor lifts so we don’t have anyone on a ladder — for safety and for speed.

“It’s much less expensive buying the new technology and tools than it would be dealing with a worker’s comp claim or hiring more people. Equipment’s cheap compared to more full-time employees, so we invest to make sure the employees we have are as efficient and effective as they can be.”

Striving for efficiency

“Shop efficiency starts by knowing and understanding the personnel capabilities and skill levels, accompanied by having the right tools for the job,” Stockton says. “Secondly, measuring the efficiency and productivity of each individual mechanic and the shop as a whole will determine if the skill set and demand are balanced. Adding mechanics when the workload backs up has been a past practice that should be abandoned until you can accurately measure results and make data-driven decisions as to the level of work you can do in your own shop and which jobs should be outsourced.”

Companies such as WheelTime, Batesville and Don Hummer Trucking have done time studies to help remove wasted time and motion in technician’s everyday work.

“We’ve found that providing the techs with everything they need in their work area and limiting the length and number of times they move throughout the shop to acquire what they need to make a repair is critical,” says WheelTime’s Arrants.

Obermeyer, who practices Lean principles of waste-reduction at Batesville (see sidebar, page 56), notes that one of those principles calls for everything having a place and having

ENHANCE YOUR MANAGEMENT SKILLS: BECOME CERTIFIED

The North American Transportation Management Institute offers training and certification programs for maintenance managers along with other fleet professionals.

Certified Supervisor of Maintenance/Equipment (CSM/E) is for lower-level maintenance supervisors. Certified Director of Maintenance/Equipment (CDM/E) is for upper-level maintenance executives.

Both require the Essentials of Fleet Maintenance Management Course, which covers topics such as shop equipment, planning/scheduling, preventive maintenance, budgeting, regulations, computers in maintenance, and human resources. The CDM/E certification also requires the Cost Containment Strategies for Fleet Maintenance Managers course, which covers areas such as spec’ing, purchasing, warranties, computerized management systems, advanced budgeting and financing, failure analysis, predictive maintenance and shop layout/design.

The courses can be taken on their own. For an extra charge, becoming certified requires passing a certification exam and completing an extensive application about the applicant’s performance as a supervisor or manager. Certification renewal every three years requires documentation of training and activities done for professional development.

“There’s a lot of training and certification out there for technicians through ASE and the OEMs,” says Jeffrey Arnold, executive director, “but a lot of times when maintenance folks move into management, they’ve got technical knowledge and skills but may not have the management skills. Our program really picks up where ASE leaves off.”

NATMI partners with state trucking associations to offer its courses. The group recently started working with the Technology & Maintenance Council of the American Trucking Associations to increase course availability and awareness of the program.

More information: www.natmi.org
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Using a pit or lift to allow technicians to easily get underneath equipment makes the job safer, faster and more pleasant.

Everything in its place. So, for instance, the location where the welder is supposed to be parked is indicated by a yellow mark painted on the floor that says “welder.”

“That’s where it’s expected to be when not in use,” Obermeyer explains. “That way the mechanic doesn’t have to walk all over the building to find it. Jack stands, torque wrenches — everyone knows where to find them, and there’s less likelihood of tripping over tools left out in the aisles. Studies that look at how efficiently technicians are working help dictate where to place tools.”

Make sure you get your technicians involved in the process of determining what will make their shop a better place to work in and help them to do their jobs better.

“If you invest in a good person and reward them for their abilities,” Clouser says, “they will remain loyal to you.”

Future installments in this series will look at the use of data in the shop, safety and CSA compliance, and using Lean and other efficiency strategies in the shop.