

C'mon Engineers - Lift Your Bloody Game!



If I had a beer with your boss, what would he be telling me about your engineering department? How often do you think about the external perception of your maintenance function? Is your barometer rising or falling?

One of the benefits of my work is that I meet engineers up and down New Zealand, across a whole variety of companies and industries. This provides a beneficial yardstick of what's happening in industry and certainly helps my company keep its head out the clouds and in touch with "real" people.

Most sites seem to have a hot topic that is the current focus of management and invariably it seems to involve the maintenance department. I am always concerned when I see engineers being run around with the latest "thing" instead of focusing on their core duties. This year, the hot "thing" across many companies is health and safety, particularly safe work, job assessment and permit systems.

No names no pack drills, but my observation is one of engineers being pushed by the latest generation of management re-inventing and installing systems. Unfortunately, when systems are installed based on mantra instead of logic, practicality and individual responsibility, their long term success is unlikely and the cycle will be set to repeat itself.

About this point, the reader will be thinking, shock horror, he's bagging health and safety. Well no, not today, that's a totally different topic. No, my message today is about external drivers imposed to fill the vacuum left by engineers. This is the message I gave to one poor Engineering Manager griping about the totally impractical work rules imposed upon his department, making his life a misery; "Stop griping. These people only fill the vacuum left by you engineers. How can you complain when they are only imposing their ideas of a system because you haven't? Lift your bloody game and start providing a professional service to your company"

It took a cuddle and a cup of coffee to settle the poor engineer down. How could I say such a thing?

But I mean it. Engineers need to understand that regardless of the topic; (work planning, purchasing, budgets, insurance auditors, health and safety, food safety, compliance, KPI's), outside influences will fill the vacuum left by your maintenance management system, if the solutions are not already delivered, implemented and transparently managed.

Back to the health and safety example. There is NOTHING new in health and safety management (SOP, SWP, permit to work, JSA) that has not been here for the last 20 years. When tackled on the topic, why is YOUR department not able to say, "Yes, we have already a system designed, installed. We can demonstrate our transparent management, a management history and our embedded culture."

Ditto accounting. If you do not know MORE about your rolling budget forecast, YTD totals, committals and stores inventory than the accountant, is it any wonder he sets the rules? Why would a company need to impose a short sighted blanket clamp on spending when their maintenance budget is directly linked to a live rolling PM Task forecast?

How many times have I encountered Engineering Managers sweating about Key Performance Indicators (KPI's) in deference to what's actually happening with their own systems? Why don't you have the confidence to develop your own measures that tell YOUR customers how good you are? Think about your own situation – if your internal customers thought your department was the best thing since sliced bread, delivering the highest plant reliability at the lowest delivered cost for the greatest operational confidence, why would your boss need to beat you around the head with KPI's, KRA's or worse still, a contrived Service Level Agreement??

Convinced yet? Enough examples. I am sure you can think of your own. Regardless of the topic, my whole point is that engineers need to lift their game and aim for professionalism, regardless of their industry or situation. In the days of “men were men” we had a professional pride, based on our foundation of strong technical capabilities. The modern world replaced the reliance on individual technical competence with the information age, obliterating the old school engineering departments and with it, our sense of professionalism. The kinds of examples described above were already well addressed by the old school institutions. Think of your own examples of “successful” organisations, maybe marine, aviation or multinational. Is your perception one of an organised, confident and professional function? Can you imagine that organisation being patronised by insurance auditors on issuing hot work permits?!

Certainly the world has changed, but that is not a reason for engineers to accept average as “ok”. Check your own barometer. How would your site respond if I asked them what they really want from their engineering department? I would wager a bet that they would desire a proactive function delivered as professionally as the other business functions.

Sadly, like the 80/20 rule, most engineering departments I encounter have their heads down in the trenches, dodging bullets.

The good news is, the journey from “ok” to “professional” is not that difficult and does not take a lot of expense, training, resources or tools. It takes the cheapest, most effective resource out there, ATTITUDE.

If I haven't touched a nerve, then good on you. You either have your act together and are already a white knight of engineering (20%er), or are blissfully unaware of a world outside of the trench. If, as I suspect, you recognise at least one example, do yourself a favour and consider today how you can lift your game.

If you are part of a corporate group, consider how you can collectively harvest the best of what you do to lift the game of ALL of your sites.

If you work in isolation, a great starting point is by talking to your peers and mentors at the Maintenance Engineering Society (MESNZ).

Like my own company, MESNZ strives to support and lift the game of maintenance engineers in New Zealand. That is why MESNZ receives our full support. MESNZ seeks to encourage those in the 20% bracket to share their experience and achievements with the other 80%. The society achieves this by recounting its collective experiences and inspirations to maintenance engineers throughout the country, via print, mentoring and the National Maintenance Engineering Conference. Regardless of your role in the maintenance function, customer or department member, talking to the MESNZ via any forum is a great way for you to begin lifting your game.

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