

Productivity is more than Maintenance



Gary Wyles, Managing Director of Festo Training & Consulting, says that reviewing the need to increase skills in maintenance and engineering is nothing new.

The first Select Committee report into the industrial skills base was undertaken in 1867. Since then, approximately every couple of years, there is a new Government report into the need to increase skills in manufacturing. Perhaps this is because we just never seem to get it right.

Another possibility is that we are now competing against a world base of skills, technology is increasing rapidly, and the speed of change is at a record-breaking pace. In the current climate it is interesting to note that after years of decline manufacturing is emerging as our economic saviour being a main contributor to the slow growth we are now seeing. So, while our attention has never been far from the skills we need to develop, the direction of our focus continuously changes.

The Leitch report in 2006 highlighted productivity as a main differentiator between the UK and comparable Western nations. The average French worker produces

20% more per hour than the average UK worker, German worker 13% more and US worker 18%. One fifth or more of the gap results from the UK's relatively poor skills.

These skills result in two main areas. Forty percent of our workforce lacks technical and job specific skills and employers in manufacturing spend about 60% less on training than comparative nations. The main skills gap though was in leadership and management skills.

A full picture emerges that while manufacturers need to improve technical skills in their organisation, they equally need to focus on improving the leadership and management skills to engage, enable and empower their people to learn. This was evident in a recent training programme that we conducted with a manufacturer where engineers were put on a course to improve their fault finding skills. In the training room, instead of being pleased at having the opportunity to develop their skills, the technicians had the quite normal response of 'Bloody management, they never look after us.'

The same is true in up-skilling machine operators. In recent years, many organisations outsourced their

maintenance functions to reduce employee costs. Now, with limited specialist engineering resources on site, they need to increase the 'added value' their machine operators provide in maintenance and technical skills. So why, when this is investing in people, is the above reaction still quite typical?

We call this an allergic reaction to change. What management has effectively done is changed the goal posts of a job, typically without telling their people why this needed to be done or consulting them on how best to meet their objectives and make the changes. They then send their people off on courses to increase their skills. Managers sit back assuming their people will be pleased to be trained, productivity will increase



and costs will come down. However, in the employees' eyes, their employer is giving them more responsibility and usually without a pay increase. Instead of being pleased, they are rankled. They come into training with their

arms crossed, intent on not taking the most from the course or implementing any changes back at base. It's a waste of time and investment.

So how can changes be made that will make the required impact on the ground? It's about a change in management style to embrace the attributes of leadership and coaching. Managing change and making it stick is about engaging the people.

To succeed leaders need to influence three dimensions of their employees:

- **Head:** are they able to explain what the change is and, most importantly, why it is necessary?
- **Heart:** are they able to relate the change to the individual? Can they empathise with their situation and inspire them to support the change?
- **Hand:** do they have the skills to guide, support and coach individuals through the change to ensure that ideas become reality?

This can be achieved if the leadership is clear, understands the need for change and commits to it. Then it's about defining this change positively and in the language of the people who will be affected by the change. It's always about answering the 'What does it mean for me?' question rather than telling people why the organisation needs this. Engagement always requires person-to-person contact and can never rely solely on company to person.

You might be thinking this is just about a bit of training and so there is no need for any of this. Training will always be a waste of money if this attitude prevails. Training should only be in place to support a strategic objective of the organisation. People should only go on training courses when they are committed to changing and improving themselves at work. Otherwise investment will go to waste and the next Government commissioned report into skills will show little change or improvement. ✨

