

The Significance of Communication

Choosing the best information and methods of communication for your specific audience can help you get what you need. This is the first a regular series of columns on the business aspects of maintenance.

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If you are working in maintenance but not involved in 'pulling wrenches', then communication is a significant part of doing your job effectively. And even if you *are* pulling wrenches, communication still is important to your work.

In maintenance, a number of formal and informal methods are used to communicate. You may use formal reports; performance measures; graphs (e.g. downtime, PM/PdM, schedule compliance, etc.); spreadsheets for budgets or tracking events; meetings for safety; or informal discussions for communicating.

But you may wonder how effective these methods are within maintenance and engineering, and how well they are able to communicate outside of maintenance and engineering.

Requirements for effective communication

There has been a lot written on the subject of communication in the past, and three issues I typically see as a focus of the topic are: a common language, a common understanding, and an interest in communicating. Is this a blinding flash of the obvious? Maybe, but that does not reduce the impact of these points.

Common language and understanding: These two themes are closely related so I have grouped them together. Concerning language in the workplace, there may be ESL (English as Second Language) situations, as industry often needs to recruit critical skills far away from North America. With an environment where different languages are spoken, different cultures and ways of understanding may be prevalent as well, potentially making effective communication challenging. Many organizations are putting programs in place to help deal with these issues.

There other language and understanding issues. At various levels in an

organization, individuals are grouped to improve work effectiveness. Operations are organized into one group, finance and accounting into another, and often maintenance and engineering are put together in yet another.

In maintenance and engineering, technical people often report to an individual with a similar technical background (e.g. electrical tradespersons report to an electrical supervisor). This improves the language and understanding issue. In this case, with language, I am referring to the jargon that many specialized groups use. Without knowing the jargon and having an understanding of a topic, a detailed conversation with a technical specialist might as well be in a foreign language. Someone may only understand small parts of what is being said to them.

The situation is similar as we move further outside our own group and our part of the organization. Other groups within the organization may have their own 'language' (jargon), and their understanding and perspectives may be considerably different from yours.

There is, however, a common language and understanding at the top of the organizational food chain (i.e. the business decision makers). It is that of finance and accounting. If you do not have a basic understanding of this, then you will likely find yourself on the outside looking in, with limited influence. Sorry, but like it or not, that is the bottom line.

Interest in communicating: I often need to communicate to different groups and via different means. I could be doing a workshop, a PowerPoint presentation at a conference, a classroom training session, writing a newsletter, or preparing a client report. The important thing to consider for any of these types of communication is the target audience.

You may have given a message previously to one group, but the next time you use it, you will need to present it in a way that is relevant to the current audience that is in front of you at the time. This includes written material.

You need to be concerned not just with the language and understanding issues, but also with what the particular audience is interested in, and present the information in a way that is relevant to them.

If you do not present a message of interest to the intended audience, then it likely will not be effectively heard. If, however, you do manage to be engaging, they will listen and will hear your message. In many cases, it may require more listening than talking on your part. With an audience in front of me, often my presentations are more of a dialogue than a download.

Communication at work

How does this impact communication at work? Well, when there is an equipment breakdown, and you are telling the operations manager that "You have your best tradesperson on it, and just last year they spent a day on a course on maintaining and repairing the equipment," that message has little interest to them. For them, their interest typically is "How long before we are running again and how much production are we likely to lose?"

It's similar if you are looking to have a proposal or initiative funded. The senior management involved in approving, unless they have a background in the area of the proposal, is likely to have little interest in the details, and more on the risks related to the investment and its relative rate of return. And of course your proposal will be measured against other competing proposals for available resources.

Let's illustrate using an example. Say all of your proactive maintenance work involves schedule- or usage-based restoration or discard (i.e. PM — preventive maintenance). Most current information from your network, conferences and magazine articles indicate that PdM (predictive maintenance) would be more effective, and you want to start a vibration monitoring program. So how do you prepare a compelling case for management?

Would you pound the table and declare that given your technical expertise, they need to follow your recommendations? Or tell them about the knowledgeable views of the various conference speakers and technical articles on the subject? Is anyone listening yet?

An alternate would be to examine past failures for situations where vibration analysis would likely have detected the failures if performed on a regularly scheduled basis, and if it would provide sufficient lead time to avoid the consequences.

For those situations, answers to some specific questions are valuable: What was the impact to the organization? How much downtime was there? What is that downtime worth? What was the cost of extraordinary measures taken to address the consequences of the downtime (e.g. expedited shipping, overtime, rebates or concessions to customers)? What would be the difference in cost of repairs (i.e. secondary damage if run to failure, versus replacing the failing component)? What would be the total value if vibration analysis enabled those consequences

to be avoided? What intangibles does the organization value that reducing unscheduled downtime would also address (e.g. customer service)?

Certainly all these items are issues that would likely interest senior management. Should you promise results all of this? No, it is not likely that you will be able to prevent all failure consequences, and promising to do so would set you up for failure.

For example, at the beginning of the program, are you likely to get operations to let you shut down the equipment when it is not broken just because you think it is going to fail? It would be better to take a conservative approach and suggest that you expect you should be able to reduce failure consequences (with the help of operations) that can be detected with vibration analysis to, say, 50%. You've heard it before, but it is much better to under-promise and over-deliver. Then, next time you talk about making improvements, management is likely to listen more closely.

Next issue: Continuing the discussion on communication issues related to finance and accounting, the next column will be about the Three Faces of Accounting. **MRO**

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