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Plant Engineering | November 2014

Guide your talent: sustainability in 5 straight steps

An honest, realistic evaluation of skills and consistent reinforcement are the key factors

For almost every business in almost every industry, sustainable improvement represents a constant struggle. Even when steps have been taken to implement improvements, they are only effective when the employees concerned are engaged and supported by managers towards long-term change.

With reference to operational improvement in the FMCG sector, this article looks at how an honest, realistic evaluation of skills and consistent reinforcement are the key factors which will make or break your sustainability initiatives.

1. Establish reach

Before addressing the skills you have or need, the first question that must be answered when striving for improvement is: To what extent do you want sustainability? This might seem obvious, but it is extremely difficult to achieve sustainability in all areas of a business and many well-intentioned programs fail by trying to do too much at once. However, by carefully defining the exact target of improvement measures, the focus will be easier to maintain – in turn making the project far more likely to succeed.

2. Do an “As Is” analysis

Conducting an “As Is” analysis of the part of the business you will focus on is vital. Questions regarding the exact situation of your business must be answered honestly and must include, for example, the situation and location of the bottling plant you manage. Is it close to a university or training center that you could use at a later date? Is the plant in the middle of nowhere and therefore reliant on high salaries to attract talent? Do you pay your workers well, or have you recently lost part of the team to better-paying competitors? For those who have left, do you know why? For those who have worked with the company for a long time, and are doing a good job, are they rewarded? Are you a family

business that attracts long-term employees or do you have a high turnover? Are the people that work for you happy to do so?

The answers to these questions may in some cases be painful to answer honestly, but it is extremely important to understand the opportunities in order for any long-term changes to be developed and implemented.

3. Age and experience

Having given some color to the context your plant operates in, you need to establish the depth of your employees' expertise. As experience tends to come hand in hand with age, being aware of the professional maturity of your employees is the key.

Many companies suffer deeply when older employees retire as a huge amount of knowledge that has been built up over decades leaves with that employee and no one knows how, for example, to evaluate the relative worth of preventive routines, or pull up a history on a particular component or machine. What's more, there is no one to train the younger, less experienced workforce that is coming in, which has a negative impact on productivity.

Having a deep understanding of where you stand in that respect is vital. The transfer of knowledge between employees at all levels of experience will not only insure you against the above problems, but will foster a culture of exchange as workers naturally discuss what works and what doesn't, often suggesting great ideas for improvement.

4. Create the appropriate processes

The above steps should have helped you to gain a realistic comprehension both of which skills you have and which skills you need. The next stage is then to design and develop processes which are appropriate to those needs.



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For example, if you have an employee population who are highly skilled and experienced in their particular fields — such as food packaging requirements, refurbishing old or hard-to-get parts or on-the-fly reactive repairs — but are not good at the paperwork associated with it, then for traceability and record-keeping you will need a process which makes computer or administrative requirements minimal.

Equally, if you have a large group of graduates who are eager to learn and move up the ladder but aren't ready to take on more responsibility, you will need to ensure that training is made available to them to provide hands-on experience. Practically, a mentoring program where senior workers guide and coach more junior ones will also help to cement the sense of opportunity and teamwork within the business while also taking major steps towards continuity.

Regardless of the exact type of process you decide to implement, the key is to ensure that they are both accessible and feasible. Actions which are difficult to understand or require extra effort which employees cannot see value in will not survive long-term, so adapting mechanisms to suit the highest number of people will have a beneficial effect.

5. Positive reinforcement and development

Perhaps the most important step towards ensuring that changes remain in place is to ensure that managerial expectation is realistic. Asking too much of people at lower levels by bombarding them with too many new processes or almost impossible targets will mean that those changes will eventually be ignored or discarded.

No one works well if they are overloaded with problems, so ensuring that teams understand what is required of them and when will contribute positively towards success. Being consistent and communicating when the improvements they have implemented have had a positive effect will also help to cement changes into the collective mindset and build team spirit.

By taking a cold, hard look at where your business stands and what your employees both provide and need, you will gain a realistic picture of what needs to be changed. If improvements are workable, teams are supported in implementing them, the benefits consistently communicated, and above all, they are given recognition for their efforts, they will remain in place long into the future.