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Chem.Info | May 2014

Active Management: 3 Key Steps To Lasting Improvement

Sustainable improvement has recently become a buzzword for manufacturers. Change has been implemented, processes updated and teams successfully trained as to how to use them. And yet, somewhere along the way, old habits rear their ugly heads, improvements that after the first changes seemed so positive begin to slip away and managers struggle to motivate a previously enthusiastic workforce.

Active management can certainly prevent the backward slides mentioned above, and while putting theory into practice isn't always easy, the following steps should provide a straightforward framework for keeping positive change on track.

1. Set realistic expectations

Let's assume that somewhere on the shop floor, high up, a valve has broken and you need scaffolding to reach it. As a result, your planner estimates the time a scaffolder will need to erect a scaffold safely in the allotted area and, like most planners, has included a pocket of time for things to go wrong in his estimate – for example, the work area not being ready for him to begin work. When the work area actually isn't ready, neither you nor the scaffolder are particularly upset because the planner had already allowed for that time and no one falls behind: everyone is happy.

If this is how your planning is conducted, you are laboring under the misconception that “padding” work estimates is an effective use of time: the time the scaffolder was waiting to actually do his work is lost time, which adds up when calculated on a weekly basis.

Instead, agree with the scaffolder specifically what he needs to do his job competently in a realistic time period and then clarify exactly what you expect to be done during the time that he is working. This could take the form of a simple list or be as detailed as a process map, as long as realistic expectations of performance are clear on both sides. Then make sure that both of you agree as to how those expectations will be measured

– whether that is against industry standards or internal best practice policy.

If success is to be cultivated, it is essential that both manager and team understand what level of performance is expected of them.

2. Follow-up

Comparing actual to expected performance is a vital part of active management, but what is the best way to do it efficiently? First, agreeing with staff to give honest feedback in performance meetings is vital. Giving feedback must occur at set intervals, and even if it takes the form of an informal chat, those chats must be structured. Were expectations met? If not, why not? If only partly, why was it possible to erect scaffolding successfully the first time but not after that?

Second, make sure you ask the right questions. Supervisors are often frustrated at not getting helpful responses from staff, but do not actively listen to what their team members are saying. When the scaffolder describes what held him back after the first successful installation, identify exactly what the obstacle was and where the cause of the problem lies. Securing change depends fundamentally on understanding the root causes of the gap between plans and their execution.

3. Quantify root causes

As there will likely be a number of barriers to expected performance, it is important that root causes are quantified so that problem-solving efforts are focused on the right areas. Start with setting up a process which tracks lost time and the reasons for it. This will allow managers and their teams to see exactly where the problems start, as well as the difference between recurring issues and one-off instances. For example, dismantling delays could be caused by a single unique error – such as clamps being momentarily unavailable – or by long-standing confusion over responsibility. As soon as you have both identified and understood the effect a specific obstacle has on performance, you can use that



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information to create action plans and mitigate future problems.

The above steps are based on the premise that the barriers to achieving performance targets often revolve around behavior changes. Active management requires each team member to understand and identify with the effects of their behavior on performance, while regular review sessions help to drive engagement with change at all levels.

Ensure that reasonable expectations have been developed, measure performance regularly and fairly and commit to actively managing your teams and their achievements. Only then can you put your company on the path of continuous improvement.