Successful Supervisor Part 11

Learning to See

by Bob Whipple, MBA, CPLP

One interesting technique I picked up many years ago while studying and implementing "Lean Manufacturing" is the concept of "learning to see." Since most of us are sighted, it seems like a funny concept to discuss, but once your eyes are opened to the data that is before you, the revelation is startling. For supervisors, the ability to really see what is actually happening is a vital skill that should be cultivated.

The concept was first revealed to me in a 1999 workbook entitled, *Learning to See: Value Stream Mapping to Add Value and Eliminate MUDA* (MUDA is waste in Japanese) by Mike Rother and John Shook. The concept was to have a set of rules whereby one could draw a diagram of any process that showed how the materials and value flowed from one part of the process to the others. Value stream mapping is not rocket science, but the method is pretty technical and has a language all its own, which takes some time to learn. The end result of a value stream map is a cartoon-like diagram of the entire process on one page.

The benefit of a value stream map is that once you go to all the trouble of gathering the data on various aspects of how the process works, you really understand it. All of a sudden you can visualize or see the way things are supposed to work and flow. That knowledge is invaluable when the process gets off course, because you can quickly identify the root cause of the bottleneck and usually resolve it. You can also redesign parts of the process so there is higher efficiency and lower waste.

One limitation of value stream mapping is that it does not deal with the level of motivation of the people who make the process work. How people interface with the process and with each other turns out to be pivotal considerations.

I like to extrapolate the concept of "learning to see" into the people part of the business. Of course people are not as stable and predictable as things like inventory or shipping, but the notion of a solid feel for how things should be working between people at work is pretty handy. For a supervisor, as long as everyone is present and doing his or her job correctly, then everything is fine. However, any supervisor will tell you that it takes a rather amazing alignment of conditions for everyone working on the shop floor to be

doing the exact right things at the same time. Imagine the challenge of trying to get an orchestra to operate in perfect sync if there was no conductor marking the time.

The benefit of utilizing lean technology when working with people is that the supervisor can walk out on the shop floor and "see" very quickly what individual needs assistance or coaching. She does not have to wait until the wheels come completely off the process and there is some sort of calamity before taking corrective action. A good supervisor will instinctively know that the operator over in cell 7 needs some help now. She will notice that the inspector on line 2 is in need of a training refresher. She will identify that the squabble between Alice and Pete is getting in the way of their productivity, causing a bottleneck, and slowing down the entire operation.

The tricky part is teaching the supervisor how to see. To accomplish that, experience and awareness are essential. The more a supervisor knows her people and the potential pressure points in the process, the more she can be alert to the early warning signs of trouble and step in when correction is easy. Beyond experience, the supervisor needs to develop a kind of sixth sense that allows her to see around corners. It is akin to the concept of Mom having eyes in the back of her head, so she knows to check things out when the kiddies are too quiet.

A really brilliant supervisor can walk out on the production floor and quickly sense the trouble over in the corner operation. As she moves toward the scene, she takes in data through all her senses, and by the time she arrives on the spot she not only has a good idea of the problem but also the root cause and how to fix it. Here is where the danger comes in. With that kind of instinctive knowledge, she can easily overlook a condition that is different from the normal fault pattern and start correcting the wrong thing or coaching the wrong person.

Tips to consider if you are the supervisor

The antidote is to take the sum total of historical information into account when diagnosing issues, but to keep an open mind to potential new patterns. Listen carefully. Pause long enough to be certain the symptom you are seeing is real. It is like the situation where the mother whips around to see why things have gone quiet for the last 30 seconds only to see her two children on the floor carefully working on a puzzle together. Nothing is wrong, and no corrective action is required.

Your ability to handle this kind of complexity and have a decent track record of keeping things going is what makes you so incredibly valuable to your organization. Keep on the move constantly and try to anticipate issues before they become big problems. You need to live and breathe the process on a moment to moment basis and understand it at a level few others do.

If you are a less experienced supervisor or someone new to a particular area, try to see the entire process operating as one flow, and be sure to include people aspects in your analysis. The more you can do that, the more valuable you will be to the operation. Once you learn how to "see" your operation well, you will be among the elite supervisors, and that is a pretty satisfying feeling not many people experience. Eventually you will know how the entire process works better than anyone else in the organization, and that knowledge makes you one of the most valuable employees in the enterprise.

This is a part in a series of articles on "Successful Supervision." The entire series can be viewed on www.leadergrow.com/articles/supervision *or on this blog.*

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