



Dispatching Maintenance Work

As I work with organizations around the country they often tell me that what they need in order to solve their maintenance issues, asset reliability, operational performance, and reduce costs to name a few is for me to help them install TPM (Total Productive Maintenance or Manufacturing), RCM (Reliability Centered Maintenance), or APMT (Advanced Predictive Maintenance Techniques). The thought process is we need a “program” to fix our problems. While all of these programs are great and all successful organizations will get to these programs in time, there are many other things that need to be put in place and performed successfully *before* you even consider the advanced maintenance processes.

Many clients are a little surprised when I begin asking questions about the fundamental components of a well run maintenance team. I do this because you will never reach the level of being a leading class organization unless you perform the fundamental basics very well, and move forward.

Here is a list of some but not all of the areas I am interested in, how well you perform in these areas tell me about your culture and vision for the future.

1. Performance and use of your work order system
2. Repair parts availability and quality
3. Appropriate tools and equipment
4. Transportation methods and challenges
5. Basic preventive maintenance methods
6. Craftsman skill and training
7. Work order planning and scheduling
8. Performance measures

Now, we will focus on one more of the essential fundamentals not listed above, “dispatching of maintenance work”.

The overall objective in dispatching of maintenance work is to get the right maintenance employee, on the right job, with the appropriate response time, in the right order as it relates to the other requested work, complete the work properly, and in a timely fashion. These actions must be thought about and organized in a fashion that can be called a ‘process’. When you manage maintenance activities without an organized process you invite chaos to creep into the mix. Chaos is like a cancer; it will grow and grow until it totally takes over. At that point in time you will begin to notice higher costs, lower quality, and lower customer satisfaction. You will look back one day and ask yourself, what the happen.

The keys to organized and successful dispatching are pretty simple and the process is the same for the small or the very large organization. Keep in mind that the following bullet points are designed to assist in removing chaos from the process.

- Have Adequate Description of the Work Being Requested



Remember the old adage, junk in junk out. The more accurate the work request is written with as much detail as possible will give the dispatcher and the technician more information which will always improve the final outcome. It will assist with scheduling as well as helping the technician be more prepared for what they are going to find when they get onsite.

- Establish Asset and Work Priorities to Determine the Order of which the Work is Assigned
Put together a formal priority system so everyone in the organization knows what will normally get worked on first, second, and third etc. This makes assigning and scheduling work more automatic. It also helps the requester understand where their work requests stand in the pecking order. This will assist with customer satisfaction ratings as well.
- Establish a Single Point of Contact to Dispatch the Work, Determine the Needed Resources, and Resolve Priority Conflicts
If at all possible have one person actually do the assigning of work. That way there is always someone who knows the status of all requests and also should know where all of the assigned technicians are currently work and on what. This can be anyone from an administrative assistant, supervisor, team lead, or if you are large enough, a full time maintenance dispatcher. The key is someone must be in charge of the process or chaos will once again take over.
- Put in Place the Appropriate Communication Technologies to Improve the Speed and Quality of the Process
This one has many many different answers. Back in my formative years we had a work order distribution board mounted on the shop wall. Each technician had slots that I would place paper work orders next to their name. Each had several slots allowing me to look at the board and know who, where, and what each technician was working on. We had *in-process*, *complete*, *holding*, and *next* labels on them. From there we went to a dispatcher and everyone had two-way radios and then to two-way pagers, two-way cell phones, big bulky dockable handhelds, and now the next wave of technology will be the hand-held tablet. The key for this one is to have some means to properly communicate the work scheduling process.

So the bottom-line is whether you are small with four or five employees, a simple easy to use system work great. But if you are large and dispatching technician across a state or even the country you will have a fairly complex system and dedicated dispatchers. The key is to have a system in place that you can call a process and stick to it. Remember the goal is to eliminate (not likely) or at best reduce the chaos.