Maintenance Training – What You Need and Why

**TO TRAIN OR NOT TO TRAIN, THAT IS THE QUESTION**

- Most organizations only train maintenance employees when a government organization requires it.
- Operational employees are trained because they need improved performance when dealing with processes and customers.
- Quality, whether a consumable product or a service, is the motivator for improving the final product.
- Maintenance technicians never seem to receive maintenance training. I mean technical training in their craft like electrical, HVAC, electronics, mechanical systems, etc.

We hire skilled technicians and work them for 15 to 20 years and expect them to be proficient in their craft. This works well for a few years but as times change we need to provide additional training to keep all employees up to speed within their craft.

Training can be expensive but when you consider the alternative to not training your employees it can be pretty inexpensive. If you are a statistics person; many companies report they get $10 back for each $1 they spend on technical training. That sounds like a lot but if you think about the life cycle of an asset, proper maintenance and care can increase the life by 50 -100 %. Think about the bearing that “Bubba and Skeeter” (Yes they are still working) are replacing. Bubba says to Skeeter, “Get me the big hammer, I can make it fit.” How has Bubba and Skeeter reduced the life of the bearing and the piece of equipment it belongs to?

I believe the training problem has gotten worse over my long career in maintenance. I rarely find a company that has an active training program for maintenance technicians. To compound the problem, the employees we are hiring have limited aptitude in mechanical and electrical crafts. Many school systems have dropped all of the shop classes that were available when I walked to school uphill both ways. If male figures are in the home, which many are not there is limited father son training taking place on the basic skills. So where does that leave us? If we can’t hire them trained we must train and develop them ourselves.
So how do we fix the training problem? All organizations need basic maintenance skills and these skills need to be updated and improved on a regular schedule. The need for basic mechanical, electrical, HVAC, electronics, and instrumentation are required to keep up with the changing technology associated with new equipment.

Recommendation: Develop basic technical training courses for all crafts. These training courses should be mandatory for all employees. You can’t make them learn but you can make them attend. The hope is they will learn something by osmosis. In the best case scenario, it is helpful to tie the training performance to the annual performance appraisal. This will make the training process much more successful. I know this sounds harsh to hold employees accountable but it is the only way to ensure employees do what you need them to do.

In “Mike’s World” all technicians will go through mandatory training starting with quarterly classes and then more frequently as needed and as the budget will allow. I mentioned earlier that we all have budget constraints so we need to look for opportunities to reduce the training cost and hopefully make it free. Talk to your vendors and contractors, if you spend a significant amount of money with them you may be able to use the “Golden Rule”. This rule is not the one you learned as a child; but rather the person with the gold makes the rules. Don’t abuse the privilege but use it to your advantage. In the past I have used:

- HVAC contractors to give a 2-our class in troubleshooting 101,
- Electrical contractors to teach basic use of volt meters, meggers, and amp meters,
- Mechanical suppliers and bearing vendors to teach lubrication fundamentals and on and on.

If you have a training budget there are several programs to consider, online training systems have developed nicely over the years and they are very good. Employees can train while at work or when at home. Courses have pretests, detailed course material which is interactive; and testing modules which will allow managers and supervisors to monitor and track the training progress. Local technical schools and community colleges can also provide the training you are looking for, many community colleges will actually develop the training you need if you promise to provide a certain number of students. And there are individual companies which specialize in craft training at all levels.
The bottom-line is that you will get a return on your investment; I know it takes a little effort to develop a program but you will see the advantages almost immediately. Years ago I was part of a team that implemented corporate wide maintenance training program which was headed up by an old friend of my named Pete Little. Pete and our company were way ahead of the times and he had to fight for funds for the training constantly. The CEO once asked Pete “What if we train the maintenance guys and they decide to leave the company for more money?” Pete didn’t blink an eye and responded quickly “what if we don’t train them and they stay here for 35 years.”

Obviously there is a risk but I don’t think we have any choice!