A Supervisor's Greatest Discovery

Bruce Hamilton, OldLeanDude.org

The following is a true story but told with time compression — a nine month period shortened to three — in order to cover the events as painlessly as possible:

Paul was a shift supervisor with 32 years on the floor. Hitting schedules was his job. His manager, Bob, related this to me: “Paul is a hard worker who has held nearly every position in production. He wants to do the right thing, but he struggles as a supervisor. His employees don’t listen to him and his department is always running behind schedule. I don’t think he’s up to the challenge.”

When I first approached Paul with the idea of continuous improvement he sighed, “Oh boy thanks. Why me?”

I lied a little bit: “Your manager thinks your experience as a supervisor will be valuable for our pilot project.” Paul just rolled his eyes. “Is there anything in particular that you would like to work on to improve?” I asked.

“What do you mean by improvement?” Paul responded.

“I mean what keeps you awake at night when your worry about your work?” I said.

Paul thought for a moment and replied, “We’re missing our deliveries, which is what I should be working on right now rather than talking to you.”

“What are the major causes of late deliveries?” I asked.

“People,” he shot back. “All they do is complain.”

“Maybe they’re trying to let you know about legitimate problems,” I said.

“Hah!” said Paul.

“Okay,” I said, “I have an assignment for you if you’re willing to try it: For the next two weeks write down every complaint you hear, and then ask each ‘complainer’ to show you what they’re talking about. Then, if you’re able to, try to address their complaints. I’ll be back in two weeks and you can let me know then what you’ve discovered.”

“I’ll give it a try,” Paul responded reluctantly.

___

When I returned two weeks later, Paul approached me list in hand with a bounce in his step. “I have a few things to show you,” he said, “Come take a look.”

In the factory, Paul walked over to some plywood risers holding material bins. Pointing to a woman in assembly, Paul declared, “Arlene here complained that material containers on the floor made pulling parts hard on their backs, so I built these risers.” He went on.

“Manny complained that burrs on these parts doubled the time it took them to assemble, so I sent that material back to machining to fix the problem.”

“John complained that these machined parts containers were too heavy and he was the only one who could move them, so they broke the container down into two smaller ones.”

“Who is ‘they’?” I asked.

“My employees,” Paul responded.

Paul went on to show me a half-dozen more improvements, including a lazy-Susan part dispenser that he’d built on his own time in his basement. Pointing to it, he said, “This was a pretty good complaint.”

“Can we call it an idea rather than a complaint?” I offered. “These are nice improvements. What did you discover from the assignment?”

“They have some legitimate complaints,” answered Paul, “I’ll keep working on them.”

“Great. I’ll be back in a month,” I said. “You can update me then.”

___

When I returned, Paul showed me a six page list. “There are some really good complaints here, “ he said, “but I can’t keep up with them.”

“Can you get some help from your employees?” I asked.

“Maybe,” Paul said, “Manny has offered to help, and we are kind of caught up at the moment.”

“Who is we?” I asked.

“Our employees . . . and me,” Paul said.

___

Two months later, I stopped in to visit Paul’s department. The floor looked different: uncluttered and visually clear, with lots of little inventions to assist the workflow. Paul looked different too — he was smiling.

“How are the complaints going?” I asked jokingly.

“They’re not complaints,” he replied. “They’re good ideas, and now we’re hitting our schedules almost every day.”

“So, what have you discovered?” I asked.

Paul beamed, “My employees are brilliant!”

___

Later, Paul’s manager confided his discovery. “Paul has shown me something I didn’t know he had. He’s become quite a leader.”

Do you know Paul? Let me hear your thoughts.

___

OldLeanDude.org [1] *is written by Bruce Hamilton (aka The Toast Guy from the best-selling Toast Kaizen lean training DVD and president of GBMP, Inc.). Oldleandude.org is an on-going reflection on Lean philosophy and practices with an emphasis on keeping good jobs close to home. Read more at www.oldleandude.org* [1] *and subscribe to receive new posts automatically to your inbox. We sincerely hope you’ll join in on the discussion.*

Source URL (retrieved on *04/26/2015 - 12:12pm*):
http://www.impomag.com/articles/2011/06/supervisors-greatest-discovery?qt-recent_content=0

Links:
[1] http://www.oldleandude.org/