Maintenance – A reflection on the past, present and future.
by Richard Blayden

Here I am, a typical consultant, the start of another week and as usual I'm flying off to a site somewhere to help people address issues relevant to them in their context of maintenance and business performance at their site. To help pass the time I am reading a copy of the Maintenance Journal that contains a couple of attractive articles describing new concepts in improved business (maintenance) practices. It caught my attention at a time when I was too busy and its been waiting in my briefcase for a week or so in anticipation of my attention.

The articles are great, thought provoking and well written. But somehow I find them a bit disappointing because they don't end with a list of "how to do it" hints. Is my judgement reasonable? Or is my expectation unrealistic? In today's world of complexity and uncertainty, can we expect to find easy answers to the challenges we face?

As I page through the whole journal my mind is skipping between the smorgasbord of talent and services offered in the advertisements on almost every page and the concept of the "tools" and "solutions" they describe. As I reflect back over my own career I can recall having had great affinity for those solutions and have spent many years making a living out of similar offerings. But somehow these days I feel less comfortable about the appropriateness of any given "solution".

Can there be a "solution" if we have not yet defined and understood "the problem"? However elegant a "tool" might be, will it actually help us do the right job? My mind is in a whirl. I can think of plenty of examples where "solutions" and "tools" have helped people create immense value in their organizations. But equally, I can also remember many instances when the reverse is true. What were the reasons for the good and the not so good experiences? Is there a general guideline to help people chose the right direction?

As my mind rambles on (as it usually does) I reflect on the evolution of my mental models about what's important in maintenance and what drives real business improvement. In the early days, I used to think that equipment and systems were the key drivers of success. Experience has taught me that people are the real drivers (or inhibitors) of success. This has been illustrated repeatedly in my experience of many performance improvement / root cause analysis examples where I have found that over 95% of the real "solutions" are non-capital. Rather they are about people and the way they communicate, think, make assumptions, interact and behave.

In my experience of diagnosing many different organisational performance issues, I have found that people are <u>always</u> the root cause and <u>always</u> an integral part of the "solution". Invariably, a "solution" that simply involves replacing the systems or the tools used does not directly address the real *root cause* issues in that situation. Of course such action can act as a catalyst for change, but it is just as likely to act as a delaying tactic that gives the impression that progress is being achieved while the problem festers in the background, only to reappear as large as life a relatively short while later.

Yes I am now <u>un</u>comfortable with the concept of "solutions" and that discomfort is driven home to me more strongly every day that I interact with people – my customers, my colleagues, my friends and my family.

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In recent years I have had the privilege to be exposed to - and learn from - the newly emerging concepts of complexity and uncertainty in organizational development. To see how high performing teams can form spontaneously in some circumstances whereas intensive management efforts to encourage team performance can fail miserably in others. To see how some groups of people can create incredible benefit from the implementation of a particular system whereas others in a similar situation can see the same system as "totally useless". To see how a simple idea can spontaneously change the direction and productivity of a group whereas a concerted improvement program in a similar situation can fail to deliver any sustainable benefit.

I have learned that many successful improvements in organizational performance have been sparked by some simple intervention or innovation that ignited a process of learning. The conditions for successful implementation include convergence of intent by the people involved, a mutual desire to improve, a culture of open communication and sharing of knowledge, trust, and a willingness to experiment in an atmosphere where the concepts of "fear" and "blame" are absent.

Sadly, these conditions and the leadership style that creates them are incomplete in many organizations. Consequently, many improvement efforts are driven by "implementation programs" (rather than occurring spontaneously and continuously) and are thus prone to producing suboptimal results.

So the real challenge in my mind is how to trigger that spontaneity and help create and sustain the necessary conditions in which the improvement process will thrive. This does not necessarily happen with the introduction of any new tool or system "solution", but it can and does happen through a process of human interaction and dialogue.

But life in this domain is difficult. In the true spirit of complexity and uncertainty, we can never guarantee a positive result and because every amalgamation of people presents a unique situation, there is no set rulebook or guideline other than to treat every person with respect and listen to and address what is relevant to them.

Nevertheless, by review and discussion of the literature available coupled with our[i] own experiences in practical application, we have learned a lot and are starting to evolve some facilitation techniques that appear to trigger and sustain the required learning, leadership and improvement processes.

I am learning that the way forward is not with "solutions". It is through a shared adventure where rules and standard approaches do not - and probably will never - exist. It is a hard but exciting adjustment to make.

Footnote: No doubt many readers will have had experiences that are contrary to mine – it would be interesting to exchange views.

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