



## **Working Without Supervision**

There is a growing trend in U.S. industry to eliminate the supervisor function. More and more plants are replacing this function with self-directed teams, using production supervisor to oversee maintenance or using hourly workers to direct the work function. While each of these methods can provide some level of work direction, all eliminate many of the critical functions that should be provided by the first-line maintenance supervisor.

### **Self-directed teams**

This approach is an adaptation of the Japanese approach to management. The functional responsibilities of day-to-day plant operation are delegated to individual groups of employees. Each team is then required to develop the methods, performance criteria and execution of their assigned tasks. The team decides how the work is to be accomplished; who will perform required tasks and the sequence of execution. All decisions require a consensus of the team members.

In some environments, this approach can be successful. However, the absence of a clearly defined leader, mentor and enforcer can severely limit the effectiveness of the team. By nature, any process that requires majority approval of actions taken is slow and inefficient. This is especially true of the self-directed work team.

### **Cross-functional Supervision**

A common approach to the reduction in first-line supervisors is to use production supervisors to oversee maintenance personnel. This is especially true on back-turns, i.e. second and third shifts. In most plants, maintenance personnel are assigned to these shifts simply as insurance in case something breaks down. Because of this understood mission, these work periods tend to yield low productivity from the assigned maintenance personnel. Therefore, first-line supervision that can assure maximum productivity from these resources is essential. The companies, who recognize this fact, are attempting to resolve the need for direct supervision and still reduce what is viewed as non-revenue overhead (supervisors) assign a production supervisor to oversee back-turn maintenance personnel.

The normal result of this type of supervision is that nothing, with the possible exception of emergencies, is accomplished during these extended work periods. The maintenance personnel assigned to the back-turns simply sit in the break room waiting for something to break.

## **Hourly Workers as Team Leaders**

With few exceptions, this is the most untenable approach to supervisor-less operation. In this scenario, hourly workers are assigned the responsibility of first-line supervision. This responsibility is typically in addition to their normal work assignments as an operator or maintenance craftsman.

The common problem with these attempts to replace first-line supervision is the lack of training and infrastructure support that is essential to effective performance. As is the case in most functions within a plant or corporation, employees are simply not provided with the skills essential to their successful completion of assigned tasks. Combine this with corporate policies and procedures that do not provide clear, universal direction for the day-to-day operation of the plant and the potential for success are nil.

For More Information:  
R. Keith Mobley, CMRP  
Life Cycle Engineering®  
kmobley@LCE.com  
843.744.7110 x253