

# The human side of change

In the September edition of Valve World, I published an article about making improvements on the factory floor, especially the machine shop. Several metrics and their definitions were discussed. Mere numbers, however, are not sufficient. The human factor is more important when it comes down to changes that are needed to improve productivity and/or quality.

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## About the author



Stephen Cherlet graduated from aerospace engineering technology at Ryerson (Toronto, Canada) and has worked in aerospace and defence

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To begin with a quick flashback to the aforementioned article. Some of the key concepts that were covered, were measuring tools that can be used to calculate performance (productivity, efficiency and quality) on the workflow, such as TEEP (Total Effective Equipment Performance) and OEE (Overall Equipment Efficiency).

Some of the suggested changes, or types of changes, included, were the introduction of lean techniques like SMED (Single Minute Exchange of Die), TPM (Total Preventive Maintenance), 5S or Kaizen. Furthermore, other issues were discussed such as implementing machine monitoring and data collection, changes to shift and break schedules and cross-training.

## Learning the hard way

I learned a lot about implementing change over the years, sometimes the hard way. I would like to share with you some of those lessons, summarized very neatly by a friend and change management guru - Chris Edgelow ([www.sundance.ca](http://www.sundance.ca))<sup>(1)</sup>. I have re-sequenced some steps and added to them based on my own experiences.

The first step is communication. As Chris says, “if people aren’t complaining that you are over-communicating, then you aren’t communicating enough”. I have found this to be true. Even when I thought I had involved the right people early enough in the process, there were always opportunities to communicate more and sooner. In the absence of good communication, rumours flourish and usually to the detriment of the project.

Communication is vital to address concerns that are present on the workflow. As can be expected, the introduction of changes on the workflow are usually met with a defensive attitude from some employees. Some of the responses from the work force that I have heard over the years: “you are trying to control us”, “big brother is watching us”, “you are trying to take our jobs away” or “you are changing the work conditions outside of a contract negotiation”.

## Build a solid foundation for change

Before implementing changes, it is imperative to answer the following three key questions: Why is this change necessary? What is at stake if you don’t change or we fail to make the change? Where are we going?. I would add one

other question, which is: where we are not going?

When implementing improvement changes, the goal is never to eliminate jobs but rather to save jobs. Ideally, we would even add jobs because the changes allow us to be more competitive and deliver more quickly. It may be necessary to have these conversations in smaller and smaller groups in order to identify the 'what's in it for me?', in some cases down to the level of individuals. Also, have a clear and understandable plan for change. This should include timelines, accountabilities, resources, budgets, and feedback loops. The size and detail of the plan should suit the size of the project. This is definitely not a case of one-size-fits-all. Be ready to modify the plan to suit unforeseen events or to take advantage of good fortune.

#### Support during transition

If the first steps have been implemented well, employees know the starting point and the destination. Then the issue becomes helping everyone through the transition. Management and supervision must help people let go of their old ways and support them until the new ways become comfortable and familiar. Remember that how you reward people, even simple praise and saying, "thank you", will help determine outcomes. Ensure that everyone knows what the expected behaviours are. Typically, there should not be job losses because of improvements in loading, availability, and performance.

#### Threat of downsizing

Downsizing, or the threat of downsizing, as a result of improvement is the surest way to discourage employees from participating in the change process. After the changes have been made, people usually end up working the same hours but more productively or in new roles. In case there might be a need for fewer hands-on hours at a machine, companies should consider options for redeploying manpower. A couple are listed below, but there are many others.

Consider implementing the concept of a "water spider"<sup>(2)</sup> position: a person knowledgeable about the process who keeps materials and processes flowing within a lean operating system by following standardized workflow. This involves material replenishment but can also include providing consumable supplies to prevent potential interruptions to the line. Another option is to deploy more senior employees to train, coach, and support other team members to improve their skills and performance. People with the right mindset often excel

in such a role, given the opportunity. To conclude this column, managing change can be notoriously hard, but it is necessary and worth the effort to do it well. Remember to communicate early and often, include those most affected by the changes to be involved in the process.

#### References

1. Chris Edgelow, "Making Change Work", Lost Creek Press Ltd (2003)
2. <https://www.shmula.com/what-is-the-role-of-the-waterspider-in-lean-manufacturing/22565/>



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