To Train or Not to Train: How to Build a Team People Want to Be On

Jason Wos
Cast House Maintenance Manager
Constellium
Muscle Shoals, AL 35661

Abstract - How many people have every technician, engineer and supervisor they need to seamlessly run their Maintenance and Reliability program? Of those that do, how many of your teams have all of the training they will ever need or want? I know what you’re thinking, “with the volatility of the market, if I train my people won’t they just leave?” I in turn ask you what if you don’t train them and they stay? Come listen as I discuss some things that have worked for me along with some things that have not when it comes to training and creating a Maintenance team that wants to stay and improve.

Paper

Pre-COVID, finding people who wanted to work in Maintenance was challenging to say the least, but with the onset of COVID and all that it brought to the table it is now darn near impossible to try and find qualified, capable maintenance technicians, engineers or supervisors. The impact of COVID has only made it more challenging because now people that might have been marginal but could have been great with some training and effort put into them, are now staying at home and collecting benefits. So, what do you do? Do you train your team and risk the potential they go somewhere else? Do you not train them to try and keep them? How do you motivate them? How do you manage them? Let’s take a look.

What are some reasons to not train your team? On the upside if you don’t train your team then they can’t be marketable and no one will want to try and hire them away from you. But is everyone on your team someone you want to keep? Another, reason might be that your maintenance team currently is awesome at handling any issue that pops up and puts in the extra time to fix it. Yes, they are great at putting out fires or being the hero of the day, but is that really how you want to operate?

What are the downsides to not training your team? At some point the seasoned technicians, engineers, supervisors on your team are going to retire and what happens if they don’t share their intimate knowledge of your equipment to others? What about stagnation? In this day and age with the onset of shortened attention spans if you think that is not going to impact your workforce you are deluding yourself. If people don’t feel like they are making a difference they will look for something else. And finally, desirability. This goes along with the previous comment about stagnation, if someone does not feel desired or needed, then why would they keep breaking their back to help
out or work any harder than they have to. If that happens you can watch your unplanned DT increase exponentially.

What are some reasons to train? Well, if you have technicians that like to segregate themselves into Electrical and Mechanical and feel they can only do their designated tasks, wouldn’t things go smoother if they each knew how to do the basics of each other’s tasks? This also leads into shared work load. Now instead of having to send three or four technicians to do a basic job you can send two. Which means your productivity could improve. And as we talked about in the not to train section if you invest in people and show them you want them to succeed, then it increases their self-worth. I know you’re thinking that if you invest in your team and train them up and make them capable of doing more, then they will become more marketable and other companies will now be able to lure them away. So, how do you build your team and maintain it so that people don’t want to leave?

When was the last time HR looked at your current pay scale and compared it to other businesses around your area? Even if you are paying the most are your other benefits, such as medical, dental, vision, time off as good? Next, what does your backlog look like? Is it next to nothing? If it is then you are not doing something right and that is a discussion for another time. More than likely, you have more than enough work for plenty of overtime for your team. Come up with a plan on how you want to tackle your backlog, get your teams buy in and then have volunteers come in and take care of some of the less than critical tasks. Not only does this clean up your backlog but it also shows the operators on the floor that maintenance is serious about fixing things and taking care of the equipment. Which in turn will encourage Production operators to report issues when they occur rather than waiting until they are a major issue.

Project work is another option that you can offer up in lieu of overtime. Figure out what a specific person loves to do or has a passion for and have them work on a project to correct/fix that issue. Or, what about taking people and elevating them to the next level in their knowledge? I am talking about specific training. Do you have an electrician that loves to work on the PLC’s? And wants to learn more? Send him to training. Have an aspiring technician that some day wants to be a supervisor? Send him to train the trainer on a task such as forklift training so you can see how he does training his peers.

The last two topics I want to cover regarding how to build your team pertain to you. What type of leadership style do you possess? Are you a hard charger that doesn’t listen to others and simply lays out the plan and walks away? Then you might need to pause and get your teams input occasionally. Are you laid back and let your supervisors deal with all the day to day issues? Then you might need to get engaged. Spend time on the floor, so you can understand what your team is working on and what issues they face. And finally, teamwork. I understand that as the maintenance manager or leader of your maintenance cell you are responsible for what goes on, but
that doesn’t mean you have to do it all yourself. That is why you have a team. And in that team are people who are stronger at some tasks than others. Utilize those strengths to your advantage. Not only will you not have to do all the work, but they will be able to accomplish it in a much shorter time than someone who doesn’t enjoy doing that task.

Lastly, I want to talk about how to encourage and maintain your team. What kind of motivation do you use to encourage your team to excel or go above and beyond? It’s not only the kind of motivation but whether or not it is sincere. We already spoke about engagement and allowing people to voice their ideas. I am not saying you have to do everything suggested to you, but merely to stop and listen to what others have to say. It allows people to feel like their voice is heard and that they matter. How do you recognize/correct? Is everything public whether someone makes a mistake or saves the day? Good rule of thumb is recognize publicly and correct privately. This way others see that you are willing to reward those who do a good job and let others know about it and on the flip side it keeps what happened between you and the individual.

In conclusion, I hope you can see how it is better to train your team, reinforce the positive actions, engage people at all levels and motivate people to want to stay. However, just because you do all this does not mean that people aren’t still going to leave. I have found that once you help people to realize they do have value and that they do contribute and make a difference, they find what excites them and what they are passionate about and will sometimes want to pursue other paths. If that is the case then fully support them in their decision. If they merely want to go somewhere else in the company than you really aren’t losing that knowledge and skill set. If they want to go somewhere else let them, and if they are someone you would want back, when they want to return you can consider that. I have found that most people who leave for “greener pastures” quickly realize that they aren’t. And those that don’t return probably weren’t having that much of a positive impact to begin with and you wouldn’t want back. All in all it comes down to the fact that you can’t do this alone so why try.

Presenter Bio – Jason Wos is currently the Maintenance Manager for the Cast House with Constellium at their Muscle Shoals, AL facility. He is responsible for all Maintenance techs, all tooling techs, brick mason techs and engineers for the Cast House. Jason has over 25 years’ experience in Maintenance working in automotive, steel, food processing and chemical processing to name a few. As a veteran of the Army he also brings his leadership experiences into play. Having lived in the north, Jason likes to tease his southern peers about what they call “winter”.