The role of the production manager

WILLIAM BAPST

Being responsible for a plant's production can be difficult, but the rewards are there for the person with the right approach and attitude.

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I think the production manager's job is the most important job at the plant, and I think it's the hardest job to learn. You're involved in a lot of different disciplines; you're really a jack of all trades, and I think you have to know a lot more than a sales manager or even a general manager does; this is an opportunity to toot the horn of the production manager. I also want to tell you about MacMillan Bloedel, Houston, and what works for us.

Finally, to be a successful production manager, most of us have to have a supportive spouse. Our job requires a lot of hours, long days, Saturdays (sometimes Sundays), and travel. We get excited and we get down, and we go home; our spouse is usually our sounding board.

HOUSTON

What is Houston all about? We are a job shop; we are a small plant. We feature short runs, a lot of setups, and delivery. Our corrugator is not state-of-the-art. It's a good unit, though, and we're rated at 500 ft/min using 1960-vintage XD singlefacers; the average order is 40,000 ft^2. We run an automatic order change (AOC) system about 120 ft/min. We have a slitter turn every 10,000 lineal feet, probably 700 slitter turns a month. Uptime on our corrugator is over 90%.

We operate in a 28,000 ft^2/h facility. We now have six major converting machines—three flexo folder/gluers, two old S & S machines (38 x 80 and 38 x 94), and we've recently put in a two-color 66 x 113 that features rotary diecutting. We have a 72 x 160 press that's been converted to flexo. We run a lot of big boxes; we keep that machine running two shifts, and it averages about 38-45 million ft^2. Then, we have two rotary diecutters, a 51-inch and a 66- inch. We feature quality service, flexibility, creativity, and graphics. Our output is about 38–45 million ft^2 a month. We made a lot of layout changes to make this plant work, and we obviously feature scheduling. Our scheduling has to be right on target most of the day; that can make or break us.

BUSINESS PHILOSOPHY

What is our philosophy or approach to running our business? I'll give you a bit of history. Several years ago, our plant was like a lot of other plants. It wasn't focused, it didn't have a business plan, it was losing money, and everyone was concerned about losing his or her job. It was managed somewhat autocratically, and everyone was at each other's throats. There was a lot of fault-finding going on, and something had to be changed.

The managers got together—the four of us as a team—and that's how we've run our plant: as a team. We had three days of intensive meetings. What are we going to do? How are we going to do it? We made some hard decisions, and we built a business plan that showed we were going to make a profit in a certain length of time, but it involved a reduction in force. It involved a change in how we were going to operate the plant, how we were going to treat people, and how we were going to manage the plant.

So, we started with a clean sheet of paper and said we wanted to move to a self-directed work force. We knew it was going to take time, but that's what we wanted to achieve. We were going to operate with fewer supervisors, and to do that we had to empower our people so that they would take responsibility and make decisions on the floor. The supervisors that we would keep had to change from being pushers to teachers and leaders, so we were very selective about who stayed with us.

As part of this process, we ran team-building seminars and problem-solving classes for every employee in the organization. We ran a lot of them, and we told people what we were changing, how we wanted to get there, and what we expected. We developed a can-do, problem-solving attitude. We had to stop saying, "We can't do this," and we had to figure out how to do things that were thought to be impossible. We got away from fault-finding and fixing blame.

Everyone in our business is focused on the goals of the business unit, and the number one goal is to make a profit at the end of each month. Everyone wants to know how we're doing and how we're going to be this month, and we do it as a team. A consultant once gave me this analogy, an analogy of a team. He said it's like a flock of geese. If you watch a flock of geese, there is always a leader, and the followers are in a perfect V formation. The leader is breaking the wind for the geese behind him, and they're in that V to make it easier for the geese that follow. If you watch that flock, they are always rotating. Somebody new comes and takes the lead, so that no one gets overly tired. I thought that made a good point about a team.

To sum it up, our philosophy is to treat people the way you would want to be treated; that's what we try to do.

REACHING OUR GOALS

How do we get there? We have a good corporate climate. I've seen our corporate climate change over the years. I've been in this business for 35 years, and we probably have the best corporate climate we've had since I've been in the business. The corporate people demand excellence, but they encourage entrepreneurship. We are allowed to make many decisions, but we're responsible for the results. All of us like that; we feel like we have an active role in influencing our results. Listening is important, up and down the command chain. We feel that corporate listens to us; we listen to our people, and they listen to us. It's fundamental that you have good listening.

Our local leadership is a team approach. We gather many times during the week, in both scheduled and unscheduled meetings. Fundamentally, we have the following as a team: a manager, myself, and a sales manager; we're all on the same page. Sometimes you want to get off the page but you have to remind yourself that you must work as a team. We think we're a nontraditional team; we like to come up with solutions that we think are a bit different, and we like to have fun. I think it's important to be able to laugh at yourself once in a while. We like to be first, we volunteer for a lot of things, and our plant volunteers for many activities. Houston was the first MacMillan Bloedel plant to be ISO certified and the first plant in MacMillan Bloedel to be approved for gain-sharing. It takes a good organization to get through either one of those challenges.

We focus on our business plan. We put together a five-year plan, and it's revised annually. That plan says that you're going to make X number of dollars at the end of the month and, if you don't, people start asking questions. So if you do something that is contrary to the plan, it better be advantageous to the bottom line. We foster a climate of trust; we trust our people as much as we can. If they destroy that trust, then we'll do something about it. We empower them; we give them a lot of responsibility. They make decisions on the floor, and they're empowered to shut down machines. If there is something wrong coming off any machine, they stop it and find out what the fix is.

TRAINING

We feature training. We focus a lot on training, and we spend a lot of money on it. We spent US$ 30,000 on training last year, and our budget is even higher for the coming year. We do some different things in training. We brought in people to give advice on wills, legal matters, managing money. We also spend a lot on professional training: the seminars that are available in the industry, the graphics training that's available at Clemson, etc.

We have monthly review meetings. Our manager takes one day every month and spends it meeting with everybody. We do it in small groups; it's a lot more intimate and less intimidating for the people. We try and get an information flow going, where people are not afraid to ask questions. Everyone has something on his mind, and the workers come up with ideas that really help save money.

The monthly review meetings are very successful. We go over the results: how much we made, why, what went wrong, and what we did right; it's an opportunity for us to talk. We also have quarterly safety meetings. Safety is number one at our plant; it is the first thing that we address in our monthly report before profitability, and it pays off. We have a very low Workers' Comp. premium. We are coming up on one million man-hours without a lost-time accident, and we're approaching four years without a lost-time accident.

We meet quarterly. We shut down the plant, take about 45 min, and review our safety performance for the quarter. We have about 100 people, including salesmen, and they're split into four teams; we have a drawing for each team. Each team is awarded four prizes, and we're at the level now where the prizes are barbecues, gas grills, CD players, anything that our people like.

PERSONAL STRATEGY

What am I about? I think it's important to be truthful so people trust you: follow through on promises. If you say you're going to do something, do it. It may take time to get the task done, but follow it through until it's done.

Expect excellence; train your people to strive toward excellence, to be the best they can be. Be willing to accept different, creative approaches to achieving a goal. The approach may not be the way you would do it, but if someone wants to try a new angle, let him do so. Let people know their value; let them know they're important.

The only way to get things done—to be successful—is to be successful through people. You can't do it all yourself. So these folks that work for you have to trust you and want to do things right. Give them some rope, give them room to grow, set goals for them, and push them to excel. They're going to make mistakes, but have them learn from these mistakes. Give praise in public, but criticize in private.

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MEASURING SUCCESS

How do we measure our success? What gives me the right to be up here as a successful person? I need to share this with the rest of the management team and everyone else who works at Houston. Our first priority is safety, and I discussed our record there. Profitability is also very important. We are profitable, we're meeting our business plan, our plan is realistic, and we are meeting it month after month. Along with profitability are volume goals. We still have to reach a certain goal every month as far as cut-up, and we have a paper mill that's behind us depending on us to do our part. That's the measure of our success.

CAPITAL IMPROVEMENTS

We all fight for capital. Houston has been pretty successful in the last five years, getting what we think is a good capital to make improvements in the plant. I think when you don't get capital, it says something about the way you're regarded by corporate.

GRIEVANCES

Everybody knows about grievances. We've had six of them in six years, and our philosophy is to handle as much as we can at the plant level. We're often able to talk through the problem. Of the six grievances, I believe four of them went to corporate.

ISO 9000 CERTIFICATION AND GAIN-SHARING

A final measure of success would be our ISO 9000 certification; that's a very extensive process. We were certified within a couple of years, and we found that it's a process that pulls people together.

We had a consultant work with us on gain-sharing. It took six months; a gain-share design team selected the formula for the payout (if there's going to be one), and that six-month process of give and take brings the design team together. They go from being fractionated to being cohesive—that same process goes on with the work force. The formula that was selected to calculate the gain-sharing was based on attendance. A person starts losing his gain-share as soon as he has one unexcused absence. Regarding safety: one lost-time accident causes you to forfeit your gain-sharing for one quarter. Six of the people on that gain-sharing team were hourly employees and one was a union president; they all agreed to this. TJ

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