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We Can't Find Good Help!

Dear Drew,

"We can't find good help!" This is a common refrain from various organizations with whom I have interacted over the past several years. Of course, this shouldn't be a surprise given the low unemployment rate. In fact, there have been approximately 400,000 open manufacturing jobs in the U.S. since 2012. Service organizations have also been struggling to find people to fill available positions. What can be done? Can Lean help with such a challenge beyond productivity improvements that can postpone the need to increase staffing? The answer is yes. First, let's describe the challenge a bit more.

The Challenge

I often will ask people about the position or positions that they are in need of additional staffing. They often can describe the position, its responsibilities, and general skills required. However, when I ask about specific processes that the person is expected to perform, things get a bit, well let's just say 'hazy', or less defined. I point out that it will be difficult to find anyone capable to perform poorly defined

processes. "Of course, we'll train the person", is the common response. I then ask how they go about training. Most often, they describe a form of 'on-the-job' training. "We pair up the new hire with an experienced person, who will 'show them the ropes.'" Therein lie the problem and the challenge.

There are at least six possible problems with how most organizations approach 'on-the-job' training.

1. Have the standards ever been adequately defined?
2. Does the person providing the training follow the preferred standards?
3. Does the person providing the training have the requisite skills for proper instruction?
4. Is the person providing the training truly willing to teach others? Not everyone is, as people at times see 'information as power'. Some will just teach what is minimally needed, and not all that is needed.
5. Other people will attempt to convey all that a person has learned over the years, overwhelming the receiving the training.
6. Is the environment conducive to proper instruction? At times 'on-the-job' means dealing with various distractions while instructing.

The presence of one or several of these conditions can significantly undermine the effectiveness of training. Further, ineffective training of new employees will really get things off on the wrong foot. The organization thinks badly of the new associate, and the associate thinks negatively of the organization. Reflect on your organization's approach to training and its effectiveness.

An Answer

People have often referred to Standardized Work as the foundation of the Lean Enterprise. Well there is a foundation to Standardized Work, and that is Job Instruction (JI) that is one of four 'J's' that make up Training Within Industries (TWI). Job Instruction is a methodology to 'break down' a 'job' in such way so that it can be taught to others using a proven step-by-step approach. The first wide spread deployment of Job Instruction was during World War II, and its origin dating back earlier to World War I. My research points to Edward Thorndike, the father of Educational Psychology, who's work in skill and habit development dates back to the early 1910s.

The War Department of the U.S. at the outset of WWII realized they had a problem. Most industrial workers were off fighting war, and had to be back filled by much less experienced people. It realized that it could not wait the typical learning curves, which could be years for highly skilled tasks, to get people sufficiently trained to support the war effort. The War Department assembled a group of people who had experience in a new way of developing skill dating back to World War I. They were tasked with accelerating the training for critically important skills, and that they did. There were hundreds of documented examples of reduced learning curves of up to 75%. Yes 75%. General Douglas McArthur introduced JI and all of TWI to Japan to help with the post-war rebuild of industry in that country.

The Methodology

First, a Job Breakdown Sheet (JBS) must be created

for a specific job. It consists of:

- Important Steps: logical segments of the job that advance the work
- Key Points: how do to each step where it matters. There are three categories of key points; Quality, Safety and things that make it Easier to Do.
- Reasons: For each key point there should be a reason why.

The key is to identify the 'key points' (no pun intended). Identifying and teaching these are one of the main contributors to the significant reduction in learning curves previously described. They represent what often has taken someone months or years to figure out on their own, particularly the things that make it Easier to Do - tricks or knacks that people have learned through their own experience. By covering such 'tribal knowledge' - knowledge that people possess but do not adequately share with others - in the instructing, the learning can be greatly accelerated. This is particularly the case when creating Job Breakdowns for knowledge work, as is often found in office and service environments.

Now, it is not easy to identify key points. People are sometimes unaware that they exist. They are second nature to experienced people. That is why it is often helpful to have someone with no experience work with an experienced person to create the JBS. They can pick up key points through direct observation and/or asking questions, lots of questions.

The JBS is the 'script' that will be used during instruction. It can also be used to create Standardized Work. JI provides a four-step methodology to instruct

others. These four steps are:

1. Prepare the Worker: put them at ease, explain the importance of the job, identify previous experience
2. Demonstrate the Job: the instructor will show the job, at least three times, introducing a little more information each time: Important Steps, then Important Steps and Key Points, and then Important Steps, Key Points and the Reasons for each key point.
3. Practice the Job: the learner will perform the job at least four times, and will have to correctly recite the Important Steps, Key Points and Reasons while doing so. Errors will be immediately corrected.
4. Follow-up: put person on his or her own, assign a person to go to for help, check frequently on performance and taper off over time.

The four steps seem straightforward enough, but they are not easy to do in practice. There are many key points to the practice of JI. Our intent here is to simply introduce the concepts.

How to Get Started

An investment of time is most definitely needed to practice Job Instruction. Think of the number of 'jobs' that an organization has. It can seem like a daunting undertaking. To help, I suggest developing a Training Plan that reflects priorities of the organization. Where do we have existing staffing issues? Where do we need to add staffing? Where do we currently have quality issues? Safety issues? Answers to these and other questions, will help to identify priorities.

Before the Training Plan is developed, selected members in the organization must receive training in JI. The TWI Institute provides standard programs of the topic, including a 'train-the-trainer' workshop. The TWI Institute even sponsors an annual conference on the subject (see side bar).

So don't be discouraged by the effort required. Instead, think of the potential benefits of getting people capable in a process or job in 75% less time. So if you and your organization "can't find good help", consider the power of Job Instruction. You won't be disappointed.

Best Regards

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