

Huddle Board: Strategies to support continuous improvement initiatives

By Phil Ginter

Most businesses are constantly on the lookout for ways to cut costs, improve customer service and drive performance. Yet many ignore the untapped resource of their employees who have cost savings ideas and know their jobs better than any expert.

There are a variety of ways to capture these cost savings ideas quickly and easily. For example, some companies have installed suggestions boxes, while some others have weekly group or departmental meetings.

These initiatives, done individually or in conjunction with one another can help your continuous improvement efforts. However, many companies find that their suggestion box programs produce results that are sporadic and slow. They also find that many good ideas get screened out, lay dormant, or are overlooked and ignored by management.

One strategy that some companies are finding some success with is called the 5 Minute Huddle Board System. The idea behind it is to capture ideas, drive involvement and identify cost savings ideas from the bottom of the organization to the top.

To begin, participating staff including production employees, supervisors and lead hands, are divided into groups. Each group is trained on how the Huddle Board works, how ideas are to be generated, how ideas are put forth and then how they are to be implemented by each team member.

A five minute meeting is conducted every day within each group to discuss their Key Performance Indicators (KIPs). The KIPs are very specific to each group and usually focus around such areas as safety, quality, daily production status, and status of the ideas being generated.

For Richmond, B.C.-based closet organizing systems producer Pacific Closet Works Ltd, applying the Huddle Board system provided the structure to implement change and support their Lean manufacturing initiative.

“We have been running the Huddle Board program since last November and have seen very positive results,” says Wolf Nickel, company president. The meeting format, he says, encourages participation from all employees. “It breaks ideas and issues down into manageable chunks, and sets completion deadlines. It fosters cross-departmental and overall employee communication, while giving all employees direct access to the ear of management. If you have embarked on the Lean journey, it embodies the concept of continuous improvement through the participation of the employees, thereby keeping Lean on everyone's radar on a daily basis.”

The goal of the Huddle Board System is to implement one new idea from each person during each month. Each idea is evaluated and every participant receives some form of

recognition for the idea they initiated. The forms of recognition are unique to the individual company. Some have recognized their employees with simple thank you notes, while some others have given vouchers for dinner or to tickets to a favorite sporting event.

The 5 Minute Huddle Board System emphasizes one principle focus of a job and looks for as many improvements as possible. By doing this, you accomplish three things:

- You allow everyone to get involved and thereby create a receptive atmosphere for change, innovation, and continuous improvement
- You open communication channels, build trust, encourage accountability and identify opportunities for positive change
- The ideas motivate and energize larger ideas that result in greater impact for your area and business

The Benefits of a Strong Continuous Improvement Strategy

- **Revitalize Your Current Suggestion Program**
- **Build Teamwork and Enhance Communication**
- **Tear Down Walls and Barriers**
- **Enjoy 100% Employee Participation**
- **Boost Employee Morale**

Rob Evans, V.P. operations of Dynamic Architectural Windows & Doors in Abbotsford, B.C., began implementing the Huddle Board system in August 2009 and immediately began seeing the benefit. “We set up Huddle Boards in four departments. Groups began to form quickly, and right now we are averaging over one idea being implemented in each group every day.”

With ideas coming quickly, and a process set up to deal with them, the company soon began to see the impact. Adds Evans, “For our company, it’s a big part of our Lean manufacturing initiative”.

For some companies, the 5 minute Huddle Board System has been successful. For others, the answer may be something else. With numerous continuous improvement strategies currently being used in the industry, the important thing is finding a strategy that works for your company and sticking to it.

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