

never finished

Key Characteristics of Successful Managers

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I remember the occasion well. I was in St. Louis last summer for SUR/FIN, standing at the huge windows on the second floor of the America's Center overlooking Washington Avenue. A colleague, who had traveled 400 miles from his

surface finishing facility to take in the show, was lamenting the problems he was facing in assembling an effective management team. "Matt," he said, "things just aren't the way they used to be. The last few years I've had a heck of a time finding good managers. If good people are the key to success in finishing, I'm in big trouble." He was only one of at least a dozen finishing facility operators who have voiced the difficulty they have had in finding managers with the attitudes and skills needed to succeed in surface finishing.

So what's driving the challenge? The answer is this. While many of the characteristics that would enable an individual to succeed in our industry are identical to those necessary for success in any other, there are some attributes that make the finishing industry unique. In my view, a manager's success in finishing is directly proportional to the degree to which his or her personality is a fit for the unique characteristics of the industry. Consequently, in addition to the standard traits one must possess in order to succeed in any management position, a finishing company's recruiting process must place an emphasis on identifying the following personalities:

Aggressive and Action Oriented. People unfamiliar with finishing are blown away by the speed at which we move. About two years ago I had a conversation with someone new to the industry. He had just been hired to head up a job-shop powder coating operation. He explained to me that his solution to managing capacity in his shop would be to demand 12-week projections from his customers so that he could prepare his daily production schedule that far ahead. I wished him luck, knowing what anyone who has spent any time in our industry already knows. Most customers can't tell you what they'll be sending in three days, much less three months. The phenomenally quick turns we must provide necessitate a unique management style.

I asked Dr. Jonathan Dehlinger, president of the business psychology firm Vernon Roche Hodgson, Inc., what attributes are characteristic of managers likely to be effective in the finishing industry. "Such a position typically appeals to action-oriented individuals," Dehlinger responded. "Finishers need to focus their recruiting efforts on candidates who exhibit a high degree of aggression in seeking results."

The rapid pace, quick turn environment typical of a metal finishing operation requires a manager who approaches his or her work in an assertive and action-oriented fashion.

Multi-Tasker. I continue to marvel at the complexity of finishing. Take every challenge faced in a typical manufacturing operation and add to it quicker turns, the need for top notch environmental management and safety programs, subjective

acceptability requirements and a finite but huge number of variables affecting process control. Concentrating too much attention in any one of these areas at the expense of another will spell failure. A successful finishing operation manager can maintain perspective on the big picture and constantly redirect resources to keep every aspect of the business in balance.

Comfort with Chaos. One of my favorite finishing mantras is, “Our customers didn’t decide what business we should be in. Don’t blame them for expedites or flexible priorities. We chose this.” Given the unpredictable nature of our business, we must choose managers that are comfortable in an environment where priorities and plans are constantly changing. A manager with a strong need for rigidity and predictability doesn’t stand a chance in the finishing industry.

People-People. John Butenhoff, the proprietor of Personnel Management Systems, Inc., provides human resource advisory services to a myriad of clients, ranging from the Fortune 500 to small, closely-held companies. One of Butenhoff’s signature adages is “When employees are not seen as the solution, they become the problem.” Nowhere is this more evident than in a finishing operation where the pressures of a chaotic, constantly changing environment can result in challenging personnel supervision situations.

The recruiting challenge here is that often the aggressive, action oriented personalities that deal well with speed and chaos meet their match when it comes to effective management of a team of other human beings. For this reason, their aggression and action orientation must be balanced by the empathy, tact and communication skills characteristic of a good manager. One without the other will lead to frustration on the part of the manager and the employee and will seriously impede results.

If you are having trouble assembling a team of managers that can drive your operation to the next level, perhaps it is because you have not adequately considered the

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importance of the above characteristics in your selection process. In addition to those skills and abilities requisite for success in any manufacturing operation, design a recruiting program that identifies action oriented and aggressive individuals who are comfortable in a chaotic environment, can handle numerous priorities all at once, and who possess the people skills needed to effectively manage a team through the challenging environment typical of a finishing operation.

