

The Front Line

To improve business, first connect with shop floor employees.

One morning in a couple of short weeks I will boot up my computer, log onto ReadyTalk and deliver a 60-min webinar to the members of a major national trade organization. The presentation, customized for the audience's industry, will be on the "Eight Steps to a Financial Turnaround," a topic on which I have spoken dozens of times. In essence, the content consists of the eight items that are absolutely essential to turning a poorly performing company into one that delivers optimal performance. It's no surprise that this presentation has been under higher demand during what has been billed by some as "the worst economy since the Great Depression."

One of the "eight steps" is what I refer to as getting out on the "front line" of your business. To help managers define the front line of their businesses, I ask them to answer the question: "What do your customers pay you to do?" I don't ask, "What business are you in?" or "What is your value proposition?" or "What is your mission statement?" Not that those aren't important questions, but what I am trying

attendee's business, I make the point that in order to change company performance a leader must make a commitment to spend time on the "front line" of the business.

The result of spending time on the front line is that the data reflected in financial reports comes alive, the leader gets closer to the work done for customers, knows the business even better and has the ability to better communicate with stakeholders about what is really happening in the business. Perhaps most important, the people working right out on the shop floor connect with their leader and the leader connects with them. It is these last points on which I wish to expound.

More often than not, when a surface finishing business encounters a problem it is because something went wrong on the front line—on the shop floor. One customer's parts are mixed with another customer's parts and the mixed order leaves the dock unnoticed. Piece counts are off. Paperwork is misplaced. A process step is missed. A customer part is dropped on the floor and damaged. The waste treatment system operator makes a mistake.

Perhaps most important, the people working right out on the shop floor connect with their leader, and the leader connects with the people.

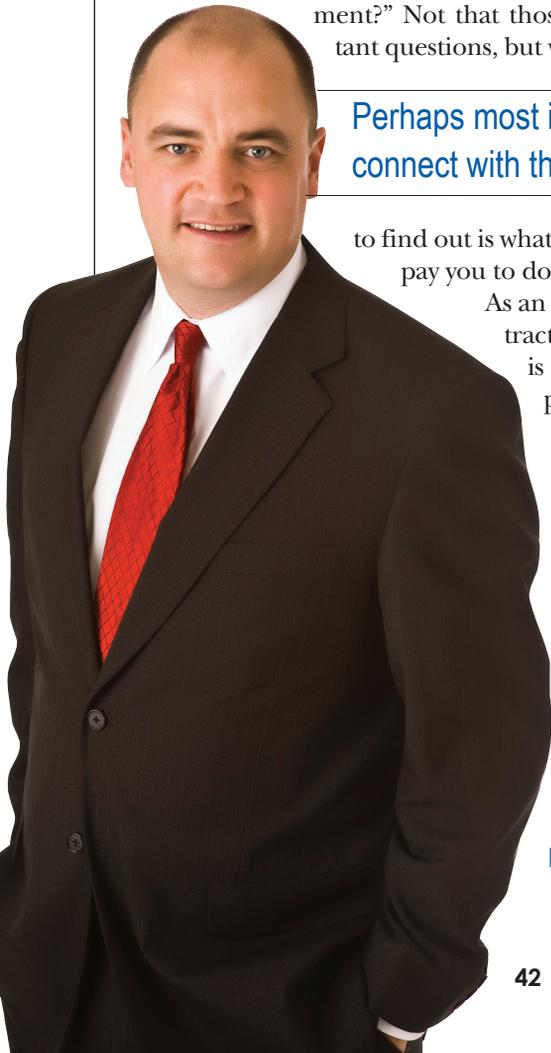
to find out is what your customers pay you to do.

As an example, a contract powder coater is paid to coat parts. A chemical supplier is paid to blend and deliver chemistry. A process tank manufacturer is paid to make tanks. Once we have defined the "front line" of each

These are the types of issues that result in phone calls from irritated customers, lost business and fractured relationships with regulators. They tarnish a finisher's reputation and cost time and money, and the process of resolving them distracts managers from otherwise value-added activities. Moreover, these problems generally occur when a shop floor employee fails to properly execute his or her duties for one reason or another.

The logical conclusion is that if a finisher wants fewer problems, the focus has to be on the front line. So how do we reduce the number of problems that occur on the front line?

Hire the right people. Great hiring decisions start with ensuring that candidates have the right skills and experience, continue with a personality profile to ensure a fit with the company culture, and include an in-depth interview to be certain the right



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candidate gets the offer. Trust me, using the “throw the temp against the wall and see if he sticks” approach dooms you from the start.

Pay them right. We all know at least one finisher who tries to skimp on shop floor pay rates. They’re just racking parts, right? Wrong. We already established that when a finisher has a problem it is usually because something went wrong on the shop floor. This is not the area to be cheap. You don’t need to “overpay” your shop floor labor, just remember that if you want dependable, conscientious and hard-working employees you need to pay for them.

Improve new employee orientation. This was a topic of my column earlier this year. Start new employees off right by giving them the information and tools they need before you let them set foot on your shop floor.

Measure performance, post metrics and review daily. Merely posting performance results on the shop floor is nowhere near enough. Remember, the average employee needs to hear the same message seven times before it even starts to stick.

Make them own results. I met with a customer not long ago who has a fascinating policy. When a product defect complaint is lodged by a customer, the offending shop floor employee is required to participate in the telephone discussion and personally apologize to the customer. Does that makes an impression on both the employee and the customer? You bet.

The front line is where managers connect with their metrics, learn their business and truly lead their people. Get it right and watch your problems disappear. ■



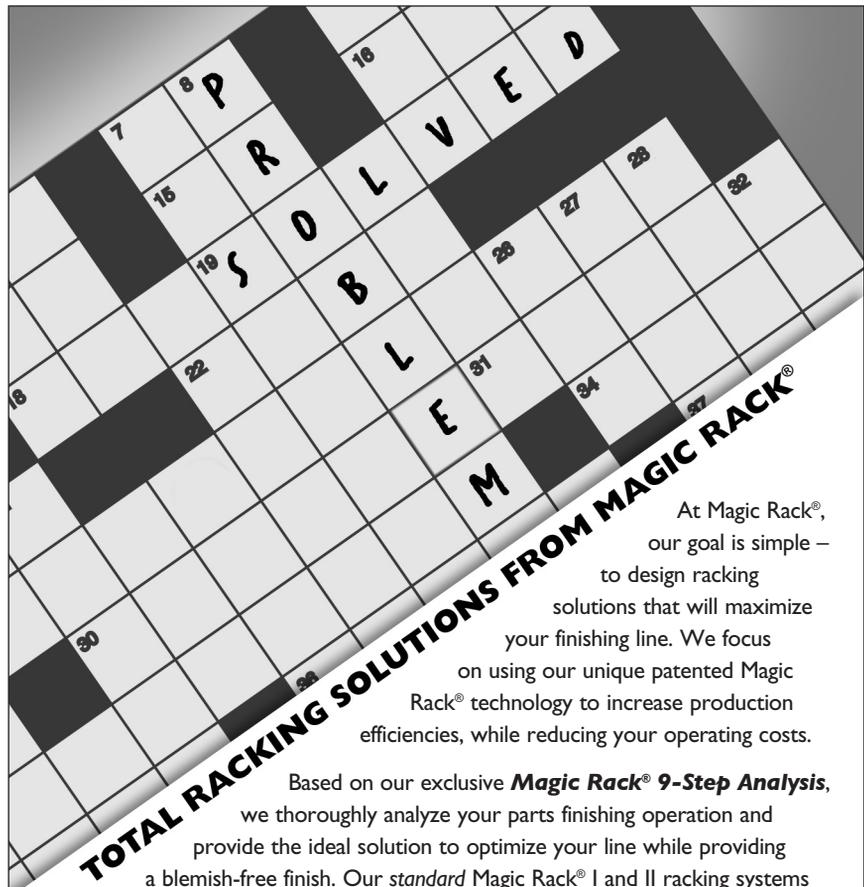
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