

The Folly of the Working Supervisor

First basemen, leadership and why a dedicated manager is worth the investment.

It's a common problem facing many smaller job shops and coatings departments. The activity and volume on the coatings line necessitates a higher level of direction and leadership, but the management team chokes on the indirect cost of adding the overhead of a full-time supervisor.

Then someone comes up with the perfect solution. "I know," they declare, "let's find a Working Supervisor! You know, someone with solid leadership skills who doesn't mind getting their hands dirty. They can supervise part-time and do hands-on work part-time. We'll have the best of both worlds!" Right? Not so fast.

Years ago, I came up with a theory that every business situation can be analogized using either the game of baseball or one's college love interest; it has yet to fail me. Imagine a baseball game wherein the team manager also plays first base. To make a substitution, he has to leave his position. To argue a bad call, he has to leave his position. Those are the easy tasks. How on earth can he figure out which pitcher to warm-up in response to the opposing team's previous half inning's double switch, while simultaneously helping the current pitcher hold a runner on first and readying himself for where he may need to move defensively during the pitch delivery, based on which batter is at the plate, the ball and strike count, and number of outs in the inning? Anyone with even basic knowledge of the game would recognize this as ridiculous.

So that's baseball. What does that have to do with supervising a finishing plant? Imagine now this poor fellow tasked with the

To take the argument one step further, when we try to combine the role of the "people who do the work" with that of the leader, we often end up with the worst of both. I recently bought a new laptop with Windows 8 and a touchscreen. Now there are some things I like about Microsoft Windows, and some things I don't.

There are some things I like about my Apple iPad, and some things I don't. After using

my new laptop for several weeks, I finally concluded that the developer had managed to take practically everything I don't like about my iPad and everything I don't like about Windows and combine them into one device. I returned it to the seller.

A similar result is often yielded when we position an individual in the role of Working Supervisor. Take, for instance, the personality traits that may make an individual an ideal finishing line employee, such as attention to detail, an interest in performing standardized and repeated tasks, a higher level of patience and a willingness to take direction from others.

Consider then those traits that would be preferable in a supervisor, for instance the ability to manage multiple activities and variables, to maintain a sense of urgency at the line, to think about and plan well ahead of the present moment and to be comfortable giving direction to others.

Not only are the traits suitable for one role dissimilar to those for the other, in several instances they are diametrically opposed.

For that reason our Working Supervisor either ends up being someone who is comfortable working in a standardized environment but is incapable of directing the activities of others, or one with solid leadership skills, a sense of urgency and a desire for career growth who resents spending half of his time performing repeatable, mundane tasks.

Now on to the response to the person who rebuts the points above by acknowledging their validity but then responding that he just can't afford the overhead of a full-time supervisor. Seventeen years on or around finishing lines have taught me that, after accounting for lost opportunities to improve grounding, increase line speed and fill the available window, very few lines run any better than 50 percent efficient and many are much worse, meaning the throughput on most lines could at least be doubled!

Many lines incur a direct variable cost (labor, powder, metals,



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role of the Working Supervisor, expected to sequence the next order, address a quality issue at the end of the line, find a replacement for the racker who called in sick, respond to an expedite, keep a maintenance project on task, ensure that product is being racked according to the work instruction, check on waste treat-

ment every hour and then respond to an order expedite while simultaneously unloading parts from the line and placing them in containers.

Is there any difference between that and the absurdity of the first-base playing major league manager? If anything, a finishing line supervisor has even more on his plate than does the MLB skipper. (As a comical aside, I still wonder why Major League Baseball managers wear uniforms. NFL head coaches don't wear jerseys and shoulder pads and those in the NBA don't wear tank tops and gym shorts, though it's amusing to imagine them doing so).

pretreatment chemistry, natural gas, etc.) in the range of \$450 to \$650 per hour, and almost none have a direct variable cost of less than \$250 per hour. For a line that runs two shifts each day, even at a cost of \$250 per hour, a 10 percent increase in efficiency yields an annual cost reduction above \$90,000—this at the low end of the cost per hour range and for just a 10 percent increase in throughput. A 20 percent increase in throughput

for a line that costs \$450 per hour to run generates almost \$300,000 in annual savings. Think that might offset the cost of a full-time supervisor?

Considering hiring a Working Supervisor? Think again. Opt for a full time one and task him with the goal of increasing throughput by 20 percent. The money saved won't just cover admission to a ballgame, but a skybox for the whole season! ■■

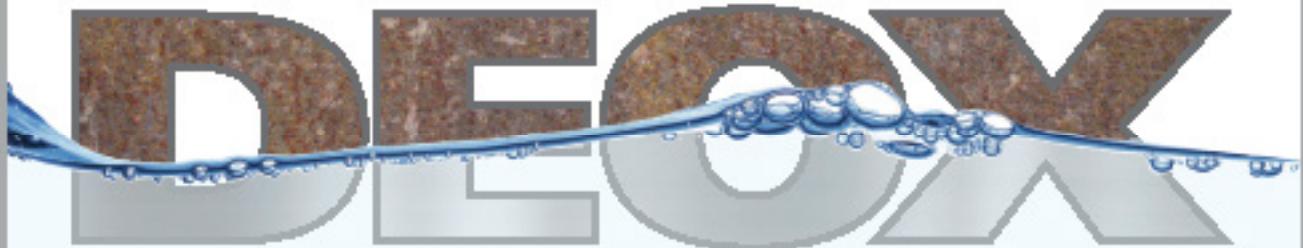
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