

Getting It Right in Production

03/05/07

My company is dealing with some bumps. We produce most of what we sell, and get behind whenever a machine breaks down, or a worker is out sick. What would you suggest I do?

Optimum productivity levels are not easy to come by. Most owners of manufacturing companies struggle to increase profits and meet commitments, and look to the shop floor for solutions. Often, they miss the mark. Here are some tips on how to get it right in production.

Focus on optimum productivity, rather than maximum productivity. Look at the overall flow on your shop floor. Estimate customer deadlines based on the slowest point of workflow. Design workstations for the workers. Figure out your ideal inventory. Look at the trade-offs between high tech machines and low tech machines. Plan for disruptions.

Visualize the entire flow through your shop. Look for bottlenecks by seeing where parts back up. Identify where machines sit idle due to lack of manpower, different from machines that need to sit idle for maintenance and set up. Recognize that machines cannot run 100% of the time, and realistically plan downtime as you plan production.

Once you identify where parts back up, and where machines sit idle due to lack of manpower, look at alternatives. Ask yourself,

is there typically any other manpower available in the factory, at similar skill level to that required to run machines that have downtime. If so, can you cross train employees to work on more than one machine?

You may find that machines back up at peak work hours, because no one else is available, even if you could cross train. If so, look to scheduling. Do all machines cycle down at the same time for lunch? Or could you stagger lunch breaks to keep personnel available so that machines continue running? Do you schedule maintenance during lunch and coffee breaks, rather than having one set time when everyone stops working? Do you schedule set up times during typical low periods, such as the end of the day, to set up for the next day. Is it time to hire? Can you start someone part time, and expand their hours to full time as they prove themselves?

If production backs up due to lack of materials, look at inventory. Just-in-time inventory may not be your optimal solution. If your most common breakdown due to parts unavailability is 2 hours, then you need to have on hand 2 hours of inventory. Or, you need 2 hours of inventory, for the portion of the line just past the breakdown point, so that the rest of the production flow can keep going.

Promises made to customers are another common problem in

production. Often a sales person or owner will over-promise, and under-deliver. They look at peak production time for a particular product, and miss the bigger picture.

If you promise jobs as if the factory works at 100% capacity, and a breakdown happens, the factory gets behind. Even when back in full swing, the factory cannot get beyond 100% capacity. Trying to play catch-up, in an environment when all customer commitments are based on 100% capacity, means the factory runs behind schedule forever.

Plan commitments based on the slowest part of the line. Look for the portion of the line with the slowest machines, experiencing greatest breakdowns, having the greatest difficulty maintaining inventory on hand, or cycling down due to lack of trained personnel. Take into account all of these breakdowns, and you will have a more realistic estimate of when a customer can expect delivery. With realistic planning, the shop will meet its customer commitments. And that will make your customers, and your employees, much happier.

When planning to make changes in the shop, work closely with your employees. Train staff on equipment to get them up to speed faster, or to enhance performance. Ask them what would help them do their jobs



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better. Design workstations that meet their stated needs. Ask how they would solve breakdowns and flow blockages. Buy equipment that end users specify, rather than focusing on what catches your eye at a trade show or in a vendor presentation.

Finally, when considering high tech equipment, evaluate the amount of downtime that goes with the more complex machinery. Sometimes simple, but safe equipment, with occasional but easily fixed breakdowns, is more productive than a high tech machine that rarely breaks, but when it does it takes out the whole line for many hours or days.

Figure out how to maximize equipment, by allowing for downtime, maintenance and set-up. Build in personnel depth by staggering schedules. Evaluate the potential for breakdowns, and build that into customer commitments. Listen to your shop workers and involve them in planning for the future.

Looking for a good book? Try Pull Production on the Shop Floor, by The Productivity Press Development Team.

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