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Managing by the Numbers

By Paperitalo Staff

Of course you do, if you manage anything. The numbers, be they technical or financial in nature, are the measuring stick. Good managers can look at certain key physical conditions (inventories and housekeeping come to mind) and also get the sense of how well a business is doing.

There is a mistake that is often made with numbers, however, a mistake I have usually seen committed by those of a scientific perspective. Transferring their laboratory experiences as an undergraduate or graduate student to the real world, they subconsciously think that only the physical and the chemical matter. This was true in their academic life—the scale was so small, the apparatus so contained, that all was within their purview and control in the laboratory.

Not the same in a real mill, even the smallest of real mills. Real mills have personnel (we have not eliminated them all yet) who operate and maintain the “apparatus”—the machines, the powerhouse, shipping and receiving and so forth. People, when managed correctly, are a real asset, too. Managed incorrectly, they are, of course, a liability.

One of the key indicators that tells me what is going on in a mill is how management, particularly the top management, on a site is behaving. If I see them out on the floor regularly talking, listening watching and asking questions (not going around the middle managers, but being part of the team), it is probably a well-run mill. If I see them in the powerhouse every morning on their daily rounds, I know it is a well-run mill.

I worked in a mill one time where senior management was never found on the operating floor, even though it was a few steps away and even on the same level as their offices. They spent their time pouring over spreadsheets (and this was long before SAP style systems) and playing with the numbers. They couldn't have found the wet end of a paper machine if their life depended on it.

Today's managers often mistakenly think that all the "windows" they have on the operation give them control. They couldn't be further from the truth. Despite modern control and data systems, there is still no substitute for being out among the operations and seeing what is going on. I think a good manager, after six or seven months in a mill, should be able to draw a simple process flow diagram and make simple layouts of each level in their process, given blank paper, a pencil and no resource but their brain.

In fact, as far as the numbers go, looking at them should be an exercise taking about an hour a day, an exercise done for verification, not manipulation. Real managing still involves spending a lot of time talking to real people.

How would you rank your mill manager's management skills?

For safety this week, standard practices verify this week's argument. You look at safety numbers, but you know safety numbers only result from interactions about safety with everyone on the site.

Be safe and we will talk next week. ##