



Distribution Center MANAGEMENT

November 2007

Managing people, materials and costs in the warehouse or DC

From the Golden Zone

Manage improvements in the DC by involving your employees

By Richard Goone

There is a huge amount of information out there telling warehouse managers how to improve their operations. Cutting through that information to find what you really need isn't always easy.

But while the industry is filled with systems that promise improvements and gains, you could be overlooking the most effective way to make improvements — talking to your staff. By getting your own people to help with improvements, you'll find it easier to make those changes.

Get staff input

Seek input from your staff as to how to improve their job functions. Ask them how they might be more productive. Many front-line managers miss out on this great opportunity for feedback. I have seen improvements in my own operation because an employee made a good suggestion.

By creating an environment of collaboration between management and associates, you will not only improve productivity, you will get buy-in. The people who do the work are usually the first to complain, but the last to be asked for their opinions on how to make it better.

A good manager finds out this information and creates an environment of inclusion.

Many times, you'll find your employees are performing duties the way they were passed

down from manager to supervisor — without much focus on why they're doing things a certain way. People may perform a labor-intensive and mundane task and say, "That's the way we've always done it," all the while knowing there could be a better way. Don't let this happen in your operation.

It is also important to watch employees and be sure they are performing the tasks as expected. People will sometimes try to change procedures to make their jobs easier, but that may not always be in the best interest of the company as a whole. For instance, a worker might have to perform a scan or push a button in the correct sequence to maintain accuracy. An out-of-order sequence of actions could cause unnecessary adjustments to inventory or more work to correct.

Finally, focus on continuous improvement and seek input from employees if a process has stayed the same way for a long time. You may be surprised by what you hear when asking an employee what they think about a certain job. I involved my order pickers in setting up pick-to-light displays to help them become easier to read. They appreciated the involvement and, in return, felt more a part of the change.

Create an environment of collaboration between management and employees.

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Listen to employees' advice

Once you've gotten the opinion of your staff, you may find a lot of room for improvement in your operations. For example, automating mundane tasks is a great way to improve overall productivity throughout your operation and allow employees to be assigned to more important activities. It displays a willingness to change operations so the activity can be done faster, with a higher degree of accuracy, and so you can achieve a more carefully planned outcome.

Sometimes you get the biggest bang for your buck by automating the mundane tasks and allowing employees to become involved with the functions that seem more important. Experience will teach you that helping an employee feel more a

part of the mission-critical duties creates a win-win situation for everyone. Doing this also continues to build critical relationships for achieving overall success in your operation.

Simple changes can make a big difference if you take the time to look closely at your own operation. The payback can be immense if you are critical of your own procedures and willing to involve workers in the ideas for improvements. The payback is not only greater efficiency, productivity, and accuracy, but also a boost in employee morale.

Richard Goone is distribution center supervisor for Weekenders USA and a member of the Distribution Center Management advisory board. Contact him at 847-478-0077, rickg@us.weekenders.com. **DCM**

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712 Main Street — Suite 187B, Boonton, NJ 07005-1450

Telephone: (973) 265-2300 • Fax: (973) 402-6056 • Email: info@DistributionGroup.com • Website: www.DistributionGroup.com

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