

management. Even though some people try to measure everything, it is important to recognize those factors which can be precisely measured, and those which must remain subjective.

Stretching The Boundaries

The prime role of a warehouse has always been to store and ship. In recent years, the concept of value added services has become a mantra repeated so often that it tends to lose significance.

Much has been written about innovation. In this business, a major goal of the innovator should be to stretch the boundaries of the warehousing function. Consider the many jobs that your warehousing crew might do.

If inspection of materials is critical to the production plant, why not perform this inspection at the warehouse rather than the factory? If packaging is fragile, why not delay the packaging function until goods are shipped from the distribution center? If the assembled product is readily damaged and difficult to store and ship, why not perform final assembly in field warehouses rather than at the factory?

These processes are typically called postponement, a concept that is not new but still frequently ignored. Some feel that the warehousing personnel lack the skill to perform any job more complex than receiving, storing and shipping. Such attitudes leave substantial opportunities for the innovative warehouse operator.

By being innovative in seeking ways to stretch those boundaries, the creative warehouse manager can enhance corporate profits by performing new jobs more effectively than they were done in the past. By stretching the boundaries of the job that is done today, the warehouse can truly add additional value.

Anybody Can Play!

Though much has been written about collaboration between the links in the supply chain, nearly all of it has been written about the food industry. Admittedly that industry has been the leader in these efforts, but the same principles can apply to all kinds of logistics situations.

The Value of Agility

Warehousing is and always has been a hedge against uncertainty. Because of this, your ability to be extremely agile can mean the difference between success and failure. Agility might be defined as the ability to move quickly and change direction suddenly. Just as a brilliant football quarterback can win games by being more agile than the defensive unit trying to stop him, warehouse operators can and must be more agile than the production plants or retail organizations that they serve.

How do we demonstrate agility in warehousing?

- By moving easily from one work shift to three.
- By having the inventory under complete control.
- By easily expanding operations to handle substantial increases in inbound or outbound movement.
- By learning new procedures or handling new products with a minimum of startup problems.

Agility is of particularly great importance in third-party warehousing, but it also has value in a private warehouse operation. Can you pass the agility test? Or if you are the person who gives grades, how well do your warehouses measure up to your needs for agility?

Innovation In Tough Times

T rue innovation in warehousing operations is rare but not unknown. We have seen creative approaches to saving space and time — sometimes they are little things, but they are steps which have never been taken before.

Unfortunately, creativity can be stifled by tough economic times. When profits are slim, seminars, dues and subscriptions are the first expenses to be cut. Yet many creative ideas are spawned while hearing a stimulating presentation at a meeting or seminar.

A few manufacturers, such as 3M, have measured their progress by tracking the number of inventions coming out of their research labs. While creativity in the warehouse may not be patentable, it can and should be measured.

However, when I explained the customer's position to my client, I was surprised to find arguments and denial. The warehouse operator simply could not accept the viewpoint stated by his former customer.

When we fail to face reality, the denial impedes our growth. Nobody is perfect, and the best of warehouse operations will occasionally be guilty of serious failures.

Admittedly, there is probably a deep instinct which causes people to deny facts which are extremely painful. Yet we must overcome this instinct in order to learn from failure.

Your Supervisors — Coaches or Straw Bosses?

There was a time when the average supervisor was a tough and demanding boss. He or she achieved productivity levels by pushing people rather than coaching them.

In football, every coach has a game plan. In warehousing, every supervisor needs a system for bringing out the best in the warehouse crew.

Whether or not it is identified, every supervisor has a leadership style. The most successful supervisors help others to do their best. Like a successful coach, the best supervisor provides feedback to show workers how to correct errors and get the job done properly the first time.

Like a good coach, the best supervisor knows how to face the chronic problems of complaints, excuses, lateness and absenteeism, excessive errors and excessive damage. These problems will always take place as long as there are people in the warehouse, and your supervisor/coach needs a formula for dealing with each of them.

Why Is Subversion Neglected?

Years ago, a friend coined a phrase known as subversion. If supervision is the art of getting things done through subordinates, the reverse (subversion) must be the art of getting things done through your boss.

There are several implementation steps that will work in any warehousing organization if you are at any level below chief executive:

- Seize the initiative
- Volunteer to help before you are asked