



BEST PRACTICES

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Habits drive behavior

If you study employee behavior, as I have for most of my career, you cannot help but realize that much of it is habit-driven. I have been spending hours with companies helping them to improve production during this time of low prices — and the influence of habits on performance is huge.

It builds a very strong case for a focus on building the right habits in our employees. Our employees work hard, for the most part. It's not their effort that robs productivity, but their tendency not to work smart. Once an employee develops a way to do something, it quickly becomes habit. Once it becomes a habit, it takes retraining to form a new habit.

Most companies do not proactively manage this process. Often, the training is not done on the job — and afterward, it's just hoped that the training transfers to the work process. Most often, it requires an employee changing a habit. Unless you manage the process of training in a way that it becomes habit-forming, it will not stick.

For example, you get a new property. The first time the crew goes to the job, they start working — often without a plan as to how to most efficiently approach the job. They look for a place to park the truck. Chances are they will park there every time they go to the job in the future. The work will also start near the truck. This may or may not be the best place to park or start, but the habit has formed.

Another example is where I came upon a crew that was working their way through detailing a

job. They were picking up trash and pulling weeds as they progressed through the property. The problem was that they were trying to hand-pull the weeds without a weed pick or other tool to help get the root, so most were breaking off. The manager that I was with was surprised because they had made an issue of proper weed-pulling in a training session and bought weed picks for all the crews so they could do it right. It turns out the weed picks were safely stored on the truck, and their habit of hand-pulling prevailed.

Right, from the start

The solution is to recognize that your production managers must proactively manage production. They need to keep a dual focus of on-the-job training and monitoring of workers' habits to make sure the right ones are created. Production managers often see jobsites when there is no crew present, and make punch lists of things to be done. This is necessary, but having a crew complete a punch list may do nothing to prevent those same things from showing up on the next list — or seeing that the work is done the right way.

Supervisors also can work along with their crews periodically reinforcing the right habits. This is a highly effective training method and also helps the supervisor to better evaluate the crew leader's leadership skills.

Another technique used by some companies is to have specific crews that train all new employees on the right way to do the assigned tasks. New employees work on these crews 30 to 60 days until the crew leader feels that the employee has the right habits.

If you train on the job, you can observe the employees performing the tasks on which they were trained, making sure the task is performed properly. This is the beginning, not the end. You must continue to check back and make sure the new training sticks. That way, it becomes a habit to do things the right way.

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