

Improving Observation Skills, Page 12

Video: Observation Skills: Safety

Duration: 7 minutes, 9 seconds

HOW CAN OBSERVATION IMPROVE WORK AND SAFETY?

JOHN WITKOWSKI: Safety is one of our most important metrics, and it's near and dear to us because it's the people that are touching the product every day. We want to make sure they go home-- I always tell them, "If you had 10 fingers and 10 toes, I want to make sure you go home with 10 fingers and 10 toes." But we operate under molds that can weight up to 12,000 pounds. If you're not observant and you're not looking around, you get in a lot of trouble.

And we do a lot of training of individuals. So for instance, if a mold is tipping over, a lot of peoples' gut reaction is they're going to try to catch it. You're not catching a 12,000-pound mold. So we go through a lot of extensive training to tell people what to do in situations like that, how to react.

We have a first response team, too, that we have in the facility in case someone should get medically sick or there's a fire. And we go through training with employees. We do a lot of tests-- fire drills, things of that nature.

Also, in terms of shop floor observation, this is really the key to the job every day. Look and know what's going on in your environment. Because as I was telling you earlier, it's the special cause situation that is what-- we're validated. So it's usually a special cause. You have to look for that.

And it's usually pretty noticeable because there's a hum and a rhythm, and I call it a "symphony of manufacturing" that takes place. And just like in a symphony, if you hear an off key, you've got to pay attention. You could even listen to the machine and know, when the machine changes a tune or a hum, something's wrong. It never did that before. So we really try to teach our people be observant, see what's going on around them.

WHAT IS THE BIGGEST DISTRACTION ON THE SHOP FLOOR?

JOHN WITKOWSKI: I call it the "tyranny of the urgent." OK.

Manufacturing, it's a very fast-paced environment, and you can get caught up in the demand. We've got to get things going. Product's got to get out the door. So you really got to fight against that. There's a lot of daily activities that are normal, but again, it's that fast-paced environment.

We've got to-- you've got to pace yourself. A lot of times you could be rushed. A customer order comes in. They need it right away. But we're trying to teach people that you don't ever cut corners, don't ever do that because it doesn't pay off in the long run. So I think that's the

biggest issue. Sometimes, people with good intent working really hard trying to work really fast, and they forget to do the way they were trained to do the job. And that's where some trouble can usually open up.

WHY ARE OBSERVATION SKILLS IMPORTANT FOR SAFETY?

LEO GIBBONS: Well, they're out on the floor constantly. They're the most close to the process of the people in a manufacturing company, so they should be observant of how the equipment that they're using is running. Is there a different noise? Is it vibrating differently? Are the readings erratic?

So they can be observant of the equipment they're using, the material that's coming off the equipment. Does it look the same as it did the last time they were in that material? Are they getting the same yield? Are they and the people around them working safely? Do they see any unsafe behaviors with one of their people on out on the plant?

The employee may not realize he's working unsafe, so they can give a nudge and say, "Hey, do you realize what you're doing here? You need to be careful." So we're looking for them to watch out for each other from a safety standpoint as well as the quality of the product.

I think people can get lulled into a sense of complacency. We have lots of different products, but the processes can be repetitive. So people, after a while, may not be as attuned to what they're doing and that can lead to a safety issue. They can put their hand, for instance, in a place it shouldn't be, and they could get hurt. Or they could be missing an opportunity to point out a problem early in the process so we can fix it. So I think complacency is probably the biggest problem.

HOW IMPORTANT ARE EMPLOYEES' OBSERVATION SKILLS?

LEO GIBBONS: The employees are an early warning system for things that could go wrong. It's critical that they point out as quickly as they can if they see something change.

WHAT WOULD YOU TELL A NEW EMPLOYEE?

ANTHONY GIGLIO: Being observant is the most important thing, I would say. They're going to get to know everything about how their part of the manufacturing process works. They're going to know how the machine runs. They're going to know the quality of the materials that are coming to them, the quality of material-- of the product that they're making. And getting a good feel for that is very important because they'll know when something has changed.

If someone comes along to ask for that information as part of an engineering problem-solving effort, that would be lifesaving information or very valuable information to pass along. And if

no one comes looking for that type of information, if no one's coming to look to find out whether something changed and the observant worker thinks that there's been a quality level change, then another good skill is just to offer that. Another--

--attribute that makes an excellent performer compared to a good performer is that they offer that information. They volunteer that information. "Hey, you know, grab someone and shake them to get that kind of information across," because it's so important. "I think this has changed," or "I think that we're having this problem because I've seen this or that."

WHAT WOULD YOU TELL A NEW EMPLOYEE?

JOHN WITKOWSKI: We want to engage our people with their hearts and minds and not just have them run out like a robot on the floor. We want people to really understand what we do every day because we do make products that save peoples' lives, so we're constantly reminding our employees that, hey, this is not just a plastic widget. This widget goes into a device-- a life-saving device like an epinephrine pen or a diabetes injection pen. So that's really important because you want the mindset of the employee in the right frame of mind.

WHAT WOULD YOU TELL A NEW EMPLOYEE?

LEO GIBBONS: I think the message would be to be a contributor. Realize that the job on the manufacturing floor is very important, and I want to try to bring something to the show.