

Did you hire a roustabout to care for your sheep?

In the maintenance and reliability (M&R) companies hire managers or superintendents to care for and safeguard their valuable physical assets. Are your people Roustabouts or Shepherds? Is their focus on fixing fences and calling the vet to treat diseases or injuries as they occur? Or do they plan ahead, rotating pastures for optimal grass growth and grazing, exploring new feed options and proactive health protocols that ensure the herd's optimum health and longevity?

And how does sheep farming relate to the sort of M&R Manager your business needs?

What does the condition and function of your physical assets reflect?

Yes, maintainers fix things that break. But effective maintainers primarily focus on proactive work that prevents breakdowns. How much of your maintainers' time (and your money) is spent on the following proactive work?

- preventing failures
- predicting the occurrence of failures that can't be prevented
- detecting failures in protective devices (e.g.: alarms)
- proactively repairing problems at times when they minimize the consequences of downtime.

Proactive work should take up 70% of your Maintainers' effort. The other 30% is required to repair failed equipment at times when taking that equipment offline has minimal business impact.

All systems fail; they are completely natural in any system. Failures won't go away, but they can be contained. This is best achieved by minimizing their consequences, not by fixing them after the fact. The failures themselves are not what harm the business, it's the consequences that arise as a result.

Excessive maintenance costs, frequent failures, excessive downtime and inability to produce at capacity are symptoms of Reactive Maintenance Practices.

Like livestock, the condition and behavior of equipment and systems reflects how they are treated. Our approach to their treatment is driven by the attitudes and beliefs of those maintaining the equipment.

Fresh thinking is required to overcome the systemic barriers to correcting problems. Managers are seldom able to solve multi-functional problems on their own, and may not realize that the problem impacting their area of focus extends into other functional areas.

As an executive you can accept the situation and:

1. Resign yourself to the performance you are getting
2. Delegate, and expect your managers to solve problems with their existing skills and knowledge
3. Apply solutions that go beyond their abilities and knowledge.

If you aren't happy with 1, and have your doubts about 2, then read on...

A roustabout will do pretty much what you ask and get very good at repeating it. The shepherd thinks independently and acts in accordance with the situation, even if it's the first time encountering it. Let's explore who's running your maintenance and reliability function.

Albert Einstein said, "we can't solve problems by using the same kind of thinking we used when we created them."

Knowledge is valuable, and it can be gained by reading, or listening to others. The roustabout learns from what you've taught and does the same thing over and over. He knows what he's been taught and gains experience applying it repeatedly. He gains a "knowing" based on what he's been taught and practices.

For changes that impact the business however, do you want repetition of the same, or something new and different?

Many equate years of "experience" to a high level of knowing, but that's not necessarily the case. If it is repeated, the knowing is deep, but not particularly broad. Those leading your maintainers are probably experienced from having seen many equipment and system problems solved. For technical problems they have the requisite knowing.

However, if your business problems include frequent breakdowns and high maintenance costs, their knowing may have reached its limits. If those problems have been persisting or even growing, then they need to think out of the box.

In a reactive maintenance environment, most of the work is repairs, repeatedly fixing the same breakdowns. It doesn't deal with the causes.

For those situations, do you really have the right level of knowing on your team? Your experts are not failing, but they may well have reached their limits. They may even resist help when offered – a sure sign they are out of their depths.

Managers

Most managers keep the boat steady (it's low risk) while leaders take risks and rock it. Change doesn't happen quickly, if at all, in the hands of managers. They may resist and even work against the change. Where change is needed, you don't want managers, you need leaders.

Managers succeed in their careers by taking small and well controlled risks (i.e.: small incremental changes). They are rewarded for that too. But they may not be suited to leading a big and challenging transformation. Big changes bring risks that put the current state at risk – both the good and the bad. By resisting change, they are acting to protect the good that exists today, while stifling the chance for future gain that, in truth, hasn't yet been proven in their working environment. It's well intentioned but harmful.

Leaders who delegate responsibility for a major change, could well be headed for disappointment. They may be delegating to competent managers, but they are out of their depth and comfort zone when it comes to bigger changes. They are naturally risk averse because it puts the steady state (for which they are responsible) in jeopardy. Big change includes risks, and we know that the best of plans never quite

work-out as expected. When things ultimately go a little wrong, will those managers revert to what they are most comfortable with? Usually, they do, and the change stagnates.

A challenge facing many operations

In his book, “Good to Great”, Jim Collins says “If we get the right people on the bus, the right people in the right seats, and the wrong people off the bus, then we’ll figure out how to take it someplace great.”

In steady state operations, you probably have most of the right people in the right seats on your bus. The roustabout thrives in a steady state environment. But change is constant, so now, let’s change busses.

Moving from one steady state to another requires disruption. Expect that some of your people will be ill suited to, and ill at ease with the change. The change that’s needed will be in jeopardy if it’s the leader who’s no longer the right one for the job. So, if you are trusting someone with an important transformation in performance, you want to be sure they can handle it.

Shepherds evolve in ever changing circumstances

Do the same thing over and over develops an ability to avoid mistakes. In consulting, our business is change, and we do “change” over and over.

My co-author, John Campbell (1946 to 2002), taught me that the most effective consultants are seldom in the same places for very long. They are continually moving from challenge to challenge, tackling them with new and creative solutions. They don’t always get it right, but they do learn. Their clients transform, and they do too. They develop “knowing” related to making changes happen successfully. That happens over time and many engagements – it doesn’t come cheap or quick. They become good at it.

If you’ve got deep subject matter expertise, blended with deep knowing about change, you’ve got a rare and somewhat priceless resource. Even the big consulting firms bring in this sort of expertise into their large-scale projects.

How to tell if you have a shepherd or a roustabout

A roustabout gives excuses, a shepherd provides solutions.

If you hear “yes” together with a plausible plan, then you likely have a shepherd. But observe closely – their experience may not include the knowing they really need, and they probably don’t know what they don’t know. They are good, but their experience may be limited when it comes to change. They could be stumped along the way, and have no one to turn to for advice.

Results will be slow to materialize, or you may notice that it’s going “too well”. If the level of disruption is just too small it may be that too little is actually happening. When change happens, the boat will be rocking and some will be complaining. That actually means that people are being stretched out of the comfort zones, and something is changing!

If that’s not happening, then you need help from those who do it more often. The in-house corporate guru who you may have, is seldom all that different from the leaders in your operational site.

As consultants, we get into discussions with senior executives about how to solve high maintenance and operating costs, coupled with far too frequent equipment breakdowns. We find that in many cases, the in-house folks have tried, but failed. Parts of the operation may even be resigned to “it just won’t

happen here”. Those executives have a performance mandate, so they get very engaged in the discussion, are quick to see the potential, and to realize that the situation can be turned around.

Sometimes they ask us in right away. Those projects get off to a quick start, and begin to produce results very quickly. They achieve their objectives.

In some cases, the executive delegates. We get sent down the corporate hierarchy. At that point, the executive is happy in the knowledge that we can help them make it happen, and they generally expect to be asked to bring us in.

The “in-house expert” is usually quite capable – but not an expert at change. Moreover, they don’t know what they don’t know. They will ask a lot of questions, usually technical and realize that we can help. As they learn they gain confidence, sometimes too much. A few will try on their own – and that seldom turns out as hoped. They are fine with most of the technical changes, but drop the ball with the people aspects.

If you aren’t sure whether or not your challenges can be solved, and whether or not you have the expertise in house to solve them, then get some help.

[Let’s talk about your challenges, the likely solutions, and how to approach the change.](#)