

Warehouse Coach

Improving warehouse performance

Change begins with you - Take the first step

By Don Benson – www.warehousecoach.com

In my last two columns I expanded on the question of where to start when you want to improve your operation, and I recommended two ways to think about where to start:

1. Identify your most critical performance issues and goals; and
2. Create and begin using simple measurements in these areas.

In this column I address what I think is the most important aspect of the change you want, which is with you, and specifically, what keeps you from starting to make change, and when and how will you start?

I recently have worked with two companies to help them change their daily production capacity, to get more lines picked, packed, and shipped each day. These are successful companies, and they wanted to do better. And in both of them, I noticed something unusual. As I was studying the operation, I would ask general questions about what was going on and why something was being done a particular way. Occasionally I asked if my suggestions were new to them. And in response to the questions about specific changes, the response was, no, that they had thought of that idea and had not taken the initiative to implement it. At first I began to wonder if there was anything new that I could offer. And then, I began to ask why the changes that we both had agreed would improve operation performance had not been implemented.

This situation was particularly interesting to me because both distribution centers were using relatively powerful Warehouse Management Systems and in both centers, they had not changed the way in which they were using them in years. Having designed several warehouse management systems, I recognize that the daily workload in any DC is usually not constant. Many elements of the workload (receiving, repack picking, value added services, etc.) change almost every day, and some even change with each wave, that these companies had experienced significant change in their markets, and I knew that these warehouse management systems were designed to optimize performance as workloads change.

So for a warehouse manager, it is important and productive to begin with questions like how well have you cross-trained your staff to work in all of the tasks in the warehouse (providing flexibility of manpower usage), can and do your supervisors

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move people from one work area to another as the workload changes, or do you get the best out of your staff by treating each day the same?

While a few operations are tightly constrained from making significant changes in personnel work assignments, most times the source of this reluctance to implement change is that people imagine it is easier to manage within the problems they know than to move out into unknown territory. The process of continuous change totally alters the job of managing in a way that every day might present surprises and require flexible and skillful adaptation to new situations.

So how can you actually bring yourself to the point where you can begin to plan or implement some change every day? The payoff for doing this is that you will begin to adapt yourself and your staff (together and separately) to the requirements of the customers, to make your performance better in some way every day.

There are many places to start this process of change for you and for your staff. The important thought, I remember from an advertising campaign many years ago, is “just do it”. The point is, just begin. Find something important (big or small) that needs to change, develop a measurement tool with which to monitor the progress, and start. The issue is our own resistance to change. Even if you make just a small step every day, you will learn about yourself and the process, and the results will make a difference to you and every one around you. Try doing something in a new way, help your boss with a project, or visit with a customer to better understand their needs or problems. Each experience will provide new information with which you will make better decisions, and each time you will become more familiar with that stranger, change.

You may find that some of the changes you implement do not work the way you thought they would, the measurement you chose may need some tweaking or the process might need to be modified. But each time you will learn something about your operation, your staff and yourself. And each time you will learn something about how making change can improve your operation.

And if you need to talk with someone, to think through your choice of where to start, or what the first several steps might be, call me, or send a note to me at coach@warehousecoach.com. My role is to help you and your organization move the next step along the path toward success.