

Warehouse Coach

Improving warehouse performance

Learning from Tours

By Don Benson – www.warehousecoach.com

In this column I want to describe another wonderful approach to the process of change. Several years ago I was invited to visit a distribution center to talk with them about their needs and how my consulting services could be of value. The facility is located quite far from the normal dense gathering of most distribution centers, hundreds of miles from the nearest major airport, in a field, surrounded by pasture land for as far as I could see. I met the manager and we agreed the first thing to do was to tour his operation. The distribution center served a widely distributed chain of retail stores.

I was impressed to see that the distribution center had all the systems and equipment found in the most modern, efficient operations. The manager with some pride described the daily work cycle, the inventory accuracy, the conveyor and sortation system, and the warehouse management, labor scheduling, productivity measurement systems. The cleanliness, quality, the returns processing, the safety and turnover performance were all of what every operations manager would want. I really enjoyed seeing what he had to show, understanding the logic behind the design, and appreciated he had created.

While walking around I began to become concerned. Specifically, I asked, how did this company create this modern, efficient distribution center, located so far from the rest of the distribution industry?

His answer to the question was remarkable. The manager reported that the company had never hired a consultant and had never received design help from any equipment vendor. His answer was that he was personally responsible for all that was there, and had developed all of his ideas and knowledge out of attending conferences, paying attention to what others had done, and then implementing what he had learned.

While I know that industry conferences are well attended, the results in this operation seemed significantly more advanced than most, even larger, and more mature companies. So I asked how he had learned so much from attending conferences when others appeared not to be so successful. His response is the point I want you to think about.

Warehouse Coach

Improving warehouse performance

He said that while he attended the conferences and workshops and the tours like everyone else, he made a practice of focusing on the tours, taking the time to separately meet with the tour guides, typically the operations manager or project engineer to understand their businesses, the needs that drove their design processes, to learn how they managed their processes from design to implementation, why they chose particular vendors, and their logic supporting the development of their operations design and implementation. The insights he obtained were from personal discussions, not presentations, dealing with the detail that is usually not included in a Power Point presentation. He also made a point of developing those relationships that allowed him to make follow-up phone calls to explore other detail points as he implemented his own successful change.

Since then I have been noticing more closely the content of the tours I have attended and those I have conducted both for the host and the attendees. In most instances I have noticed that the tourists and tour guides focus on the obvious physical and visual results, the wonderful clean and apparently efficient operation, etc. We seldom hear questions about how the operation works, what were the desired outcomes in the design of the facility, daily planning, order characteristics, labor scheduling, etc., or why a particular piece of equipment was selected. I suggest that you consider planning your process next time you have the opportunity to tour another facility.

Oh yes, regarding the consulting opportunity - we talk on the phone once in a while, but I doubt that he will ever hire a consultant.

However, if you would like to talk with a seasoned professional about your distribution operation, your operations issues, or your professional objectives, please call me at 1-503-296-7249, or send a note to coach@warehousecoach.com.