What’s Your R&M True North?

My leadership presentation starts with a slide that states, “If you don’t know where you are going, you may get where you are headed.” That’s because I continue to see a cafeteria-style approach to reliability and maintainability (R&M), i.e., just choosing a few things to implement. Organizations that make the most progress have a clearly defined R&M strategy and vision. This includes being properly aligned up and down the organization, with clear roles and responsibilities for each department and level.

Many readers have heard the words, “find your True North.” Used in the lean-production arena for about 20 years, they reflect a concept from the Toyota Production System and practices of continuous improvement. (While those teachings are consistent with what is now referred to as “True North,” I never heard the term used around NUMMI—the Toyota-General Motors joint manufacturing venture [1984 to 2010], in Fremont, CA.) The concept is equally important for R&M, because it affects almost everything in your organization, including safety, productivity/uptime, quality, inventory, and cost.

True North is an idiom which, according to merriam-webster.com, is an expression that cannot be understood from the meanings of its separate words, but has a separate meaning of its own. It translates as a concept, a belief, and a vision.

In the case of R&M, what we do as groups and individuals to be successful will vary. Collectively, however, True North is the ideal state that defines continual improvement toward the greater good. It’s the hundreds and thousands of small steps that move companies closer to business excellence, i.e., what we should do, not what we can do. “Zero downtime” is but one example of a True North R&M metric.

What is a single R&M item that everyone and everything at your site can align behind and support? Once that’s established, you can develop an R&M roadmap to guide your organization through the activities that will move it from where it is today, to where it wants to be.

While arriving at True North (using geographical lines on a map running toward the North pole) is different than arriving at magnetic-north (using a compass) or astronomical north (using stars), it’s still easy to become confused, disoriented, or misguided when you’re out in the field. The same applies to R&M.

You want your facility to be more efficient and effective in bottom-line results. So here comes reliability-centered maintenance (RCM), root-cause analysis (RCA), failure modes and effects analysis (FMEA), Weibull analysis, and predictive technologies with smart systems that learn. Lean isn’t fully implemented, you’re using less than half your CMMS (computerized maintenance management system) functionality, and you’re still working on getting more benefits from the total-productive-maintenance (TPM) program that you started 10 years ago.

Most plants have some quality certification and may be pursuing LEED (Leadership in Energy & Environmental Design) certification. But then comes the ISO 55000 asset-management standard. How does that fit into your plans?

Someone in your organization needs to be the gatekeeper of new initiatives, especially those that cross departmental boundaries. Just as a magnetic compass isn’t useful in the arctic region, i.e., closer to the action R&M implementations will be compromised by personal and departmental wants. You need to be able to look less at the tools and technologies and more at work concepts and leadership to find your True North.

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