

Get the most from your personnel

In the fall of 2009 a team came together for two days to identify ways to improve concrete patching in the city of Fort Dodge. The team consisted of maintenance workers and managers from public works and other departments, including the city manager.



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While large street resurfacing projects were contracted out, smaller patching jobs were historically split between city workers and local contractors. City officials hoped that by improving their productivity, a larger percentage of patching jobs could be completed by city employees, thus reducing external spending.

The team started by taking a hard look at the processes they used. This included data collected from the just complete patching season.

They also viewed a videotape from a recent patching job. The video showed several instances of multiple workers leaning on shovels and watching as a couple of co-workers performed a task. Everyone in the room was

sensitive to the stereotype; watching it on tape wasn't particularly pleasant.

But a wonderful thing happened as the team critically analyzed its current methods. It realized each patching job was made up of a number of repetitive steps: prepping the job, breaking up the bad section of street, removing the bad material, setting forms, etc. These various steps had widely varying labor demands. Breaking up concrete could be safely accomplished by a single worker, while pouring concrete required all hands on deck.

The practice for assigning workers always had been to send the entire crew needed to satisfy the peak demand step (pouring concrete) out for the entire project. Thus, the number of busy (and idle) workers cycled as the job moved from one step to the next. Workers leaning on shovels wasn't a statement of work ethic; it was the result of a less-than-ideal scheduling process.

Excitement grew as the team started to define how things could look different during

2010. Streets supervisors agreed they could schedule workers by process step rather than by job. The team defined each distinct process step and the number of workers required to safely and effectively complete it.

In order to take full advantage of this strategy, the city would have to have multiple projects occurring simultaneously so that workers could move to another project during a non-peak step. The team realized this was possible so long as they minimized the time when a street was impassable for drivers. Many of the prep and finishing steps could occur several days before or after the required shutdown of the street with no impact to traffic flow.

The old way of scheduling was pretty straightforward: Work one project at a time and send out the whole crew. The new method involved much more communication and coordination between multiple jobs. To help keep everyone on the same page, a white board was converted into a large visual calendar, providing real-time updates of job status and assignments.

The results were amazing. During 2010, city workers patched almost three times as much area as they had in 2009. The city eliminated all contracting of patching jobs, saving tens of thousands of dollars.

But the improvement didn't stop there. Following the 2010 season, employees got back together to discuss lessons learned. It was noted that the streets department could do a better job of working with the engineering department to prioritize and schedule jobs for the upcoming season. This allowed for a more realistic schedule and for jobs to be better timed for minimal disruption to traffic.

The streets department also recognized that it had been overly ambitious in taking on a large project in a low-lying area. The project dragged on for weeks when constant drainage into the job site during the wet summer made conditions unworkable. Future projects in similar areas would be broken up into several smaller jobs.

Crews set another record in 2011, topping 2010 by another 40 percent. Again, lessons

learned following the season identified further improvements. 2012 saw yet another record, topping the prior year by two percent or 4.2 times the amount accomplished in 2009 with the same number of employees.

Improvements such as this are possible when teams commit to excellence. And when management recognizes that mediocre performance almost always results from bad processes, not bad people.

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