

Job Title in the Manufacturing HPO Environment

I always find it interesting how job titles are very important to people on the career ladder . Sometimes the job title is more important than the salary increase that often comes with the promotion. In a High Performing Organisation (HPO) the job titles of leaders and colleagues are important only in so much that they should reflect the culture the organisation is working to build. I'll come back to these points further on in the article but let me explain how my views on Leadership began and why changing perspectives has been a key factor in my own journey.

I started my career as a 16 year old engineering apprentice. Fresh out of school I was excited, full of energy and keen to learn. I was full of ideas and eager to make suggestions even at that age. I was soon brought down to earth by the men in white coats , Engineering Supervisors who made it clear to me that my job was not to think but to, 'do'. I was literally told to leave my brains at the factory gate and bring my hands to work. It was even harder for the, 'Operators', who despite running the plant and equipment day in and day out and knew more than anyone else about the root causes of continuous breakdowns. When plant breakdowns occurred, they were told to brush up, no one listened to them and as a result, minor stoppages were never successfully eliminated and morale and engagement were very low.

In the seventies, time management seemed to be more important than output. Low behold if you arrived a minute late or left a minute early. As a result, people would not work a minute longer than their scheduled eight-hour day unless they were paid time and a half and even then a minimum of four hours (six hours pay) was the accepted minimum overtime even if the job only took a few minutes. It would be easy to blame the workforce or unions for intransigence but even in those early days I could see it was autocratic management/supervision. To this end, there were synchronised clocks around the site driven by my master clocks. Responsibility for the maintenance of the clocks lay with the Electrical Instrument Department. As apprentices, we would spend six months working around the different departments. During my time in Instruments, I was asked by the Supervisor to change a clock on the balcony in the main offices. The balcony looked down on the main office area, full of typists and clerks. The balcony was on four sides and had wood-panelled offices where the senior management were based with silver service and coal fires. So up to the balcony, I trotted feeling happy I had been given responsibility albeit to disconnect two wires and swap a clock. As I wandered along the balcony looking for the right office, someone grabbed my collar from behind and rather sneeringly said, 'What are you doing up here boy, people like you are not allowed up here in your dirty overalls' ? The person in question , wearing a suit, collar and tie, was clearly a senior manager. From the clock under my arm, it was obvious what I was doing there. I hastily explained my reasons, only to be told to hurry up and remove myself promptly. Twenty-five year later, I returned to the site. By then, I was a senior executive (excuse the title, but it is essential to the story) and the most senior person on the site. The wood-panelled offices were still there, with managers comfortably inside. Within six months I created a completely open-plan environment for everyone irrespective of grade and turned the offices into glass-fronted meeting rooms. The experience as a young apprentice burnt in my soul and I was delighted to make a more progressive and inclusive workspace twenty-five years later.

My journey to change thinking started some years later when as a Shift Supervisor, on the appointment I refused the job title and therefore the job unless it was changed to Shift Leader. Fortunately, by then we had more enlightened Leadership, and they readily accepted. I then delayered the shift removing ' Chargehands' and creating Team Leaders. It may seem like a minor change today but way back then it was revolutionary. I also set up annual discussions with each team member. The unions were soon on my back accusing me of bringing in appraisals by the back door. Fortunately, I had a good enough relationship to convince them that it was no more than a forward-looking conversation with a big emphasis on training and development and no notes were to be taken. Within a few months, we were breaking shift records, absences dropped and morale and engagement improved .

A few years later having had a number of promotions, I had my first Operation Leader role (my title, not the official Operations Manager title). I now had the freedom to put into practice all the new ideas I had read about or indeed

dreamt about. We created self-managing teams, started working on Reliability Centred Maintenance, and as a result we became the first plant in Unilever globally to pilot a new process called TPM. Alongside the DuPont Safety Programme, it was something that completely changed my outlook in Manufacturing and Supply Chain. I will share that journey in a later post.

In writing this post, I hope to give an insight to the younger generation of Manufacturing Leaders just what it was like in many companies in the seventies and eighties. The big surprise to me is that latterly I realised that even in some global multinationals, the culture I experienced in the past is still prevalent today. Job titles like, Operator and Supervisor, are still common. In the same companies, you will find leaders who are precious about their own job titles whilst using derogatory job titles for their direct reports. Progressive companies, particularly those who have gone through the Operational Excellence journey, are more like to call themselves Leaders or Coaches. They lead teams, colleagues or associates, not operators whose title was derived during the Industrial Revolution almost 200 years ago. Likewise, their organisational structure will be flatter to encourage self-management and job enrichment not hierarchical like the military where organisational design emanated again during the Industrial Revolution. Sensible risk-taking is encouraged, and they achieve higher productivity and competitive advantage from Operational Excellence.

Thank you for reading this post. I hope you enjoyed it. If you would like to explore how your company can benefit from working alongside a team of seasoned Operational people, please visit our website www.sc-excellence.com