

The CNC Shop With Tom Morin

All Systems Go

The success of your business relies on systems

This will be my last column for a while. I'd like to leave with some advice that may seem mundane, but that I think is critical to success in our business.

You can't do it all and you can't be everywhere. The only way to keep sane is to build systems — lots and lots of them. In fact, the size and success of your enterprise is limited by your ability to build and maintain good quality systems.

A system is anything that defines standards for how things are to happen in a shop, office or job site. It could be how to order paperclips, how to install baseboard, how a part moves from workstation to workstation in a shop or how a project is dealt with in the estimating department.

The goal of a good system is to give people a set of rules for how they deal with their day-to-day tasks. Systems prevent employees from needing to stop and work out problems because the foreseeable problems have already been worked out. A system tells staff what is acceptable quality, what is not and what is to be done in each case. Over time they become the accumulated wisdom of an organization.

Here are my guiding principles:

Rule one: A weak system is almost always better than no system. No system equals chaos. The outcome of work is unpredictable, untrackable, and nobody is accountable.

Rule two: Systems must be enforced with dictatorial-

like zeal. Straying from a developed process causes confusion and inefficiency. That's not to say the systems don't change. In fact good ones change constantly. More on that below.

Rule three: Building a system is a creative process. Its developer should be an original, imaginative thinker.

Rule four: Systems must be written down and formalized (unfortunately, many of those creative thinkers, aren't good at writing things down — force them).

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Here's how, when creating a system, I put those guiding principles in place.

Start by getting input from the people that will be involved in carrying out the system. They will help to foresee the pitfalls. It will also be easier to implement a system that people have contributed to.

No matter how hard you try, no system will be perfect. The important thing is to implement the best process you are able to given the time and resources you have. Write down the system to make it easy to under-

stand and to follow. Make forms or charts that are easy to fill out. When the system is important to productivity, it must contain ways of capturing data so that results are measurable and can be compared.

Now it's time be to a dictator and enforce the new system. Everyone must follow it despite its flaws. If the system is not fully followed its strengths and weaknesses cannot be assessed.

Another key component in development is getting feedback from the people who use the system day-to-day since they are the ones who best understand its strengths and weaknesses. It is critical to listen to their advice since they hold the key to perfecting the system. Use their suggestions to tweak the system and to update the formal written version.

The system can now be reimplemented with its improvements. Implementing, listening and revising, and reimplementing, should become part of the ongoing process. Staff will become accustomed to the idea that every system is like a science experiment where new ideas are discussed, tested then formalized and implemented. Over time, the results are analyzed and the most efficient way forward emerges.

The best way to free yourself from day-to-day decision making and inefficiency is through the implementation of systems. Once a system is built it's like leaving a piece of yourself behind to continue to manage things while you go on to deal with more pressing matters. Encouraging ideas from the shop floor will perfect your systems over time and achieve great gains in productivity. **WW**

Tom Morin runs Morinwood Contract Millwork in Victoria BC. He's taking a hiatus from this space and this time he means it.



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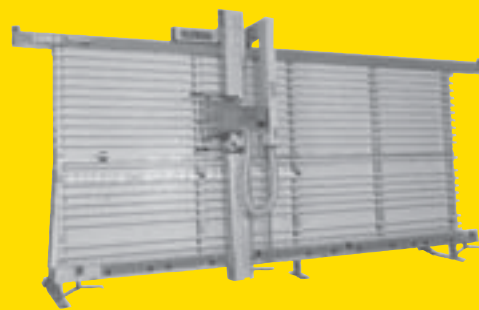
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