

The Power of Production Control Boards

The production control board is a key visual tool for enabling the efficient management of a lean operation.

By Dan Davis

If you were to bring a visitor to your receiving dock, could he accurately assess the status of your operation after a quick two-minute review?

One tool that's very helpful in obtaining an accurate assessment of an operations environment is an instrument called a production control board. A production control board is located on site, provides frequent updates on the status of an operation, and produces easy-to-understand information that even a newcomer can use to make a quick assessment.

The production control board tells the story of the daily operations. It speaks to the past as well, showing weekly and monthly trends. The idea is to have board information updated frequently by a team member (typically hourly) to show the status of the operation so that a complete stranger, foreign to the process, can understand.

In a lean operation environment, visual communication is very important. The production control board allows the supervisor, at a glance, to see how well the area is performing. The supervisor doesn't have to go behind a desk to learn about the status; while still on the floor, he can see if he needs to make any adjustments to make sure the task is done on time and to the customer's satisfaction.

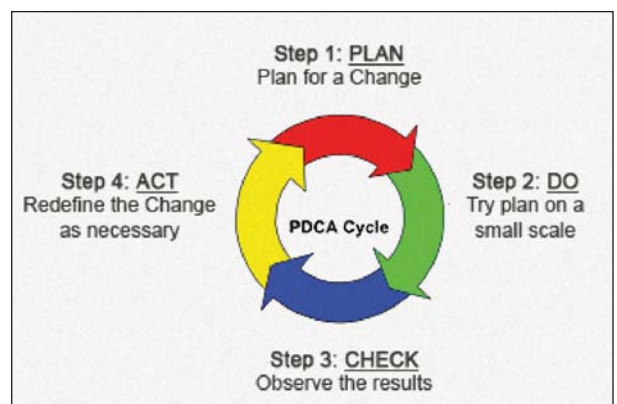
An important benefit of the production control board is its ability to place information in its proper context. Data can often be misinterpreted when presented in the "upstairs conference room," separated from the realities of the warehouse floor. However, it is hard to argue the facts when the data is presented in the area where it was created. As a result, as the understanding of lean management within an organization grows, the daily production or hand-off meetings can take place in front of the production control board.

By utilizing the production control board, supervisors spend their time adding value to the process rather than just

trying to find information. In fact, the entire team has access to the information. Instead of basing future projections on dated reports provided by management (kind of like looking into the rear-view mirror to figure out how to move forward), the warehouse team now has access to real-time data. Mature teams will respond appropriately to the signals from the production control board, and adjust staffing up or down to best meet customer requirements.

Information from the production control board provides key departmental data, by using a balanced scorecard approach, from metrics in the following areas: quality, safety, cost and delivery. Each day a target is established along with the times the measurements towards the target should be measured. For example, a safety measurement may only be recorded once daily, while a delivery measurement likely will be recorded hourly. The target goal is usually highlighted in black; the actual result will be recorded in red and green. Universally, everyone understands red represents 'stop' or trouble and green represents money or good.

If a target is not met a team member must write down the reasons why the production goal was missed. The supervisor then discusses with the team the root causes and potential solutions. The new solution is implemented and tested to determine if the problem issue is eliminated. If that solution doesn't work, the team resumes its search for another solution. This philosophy directly corresponds to the Plan, Do, Check and Act process invented by W. Edwards Deming to promote continuous improvement in manufacturing (see PDCA Cycle diagram below).



The production control board is a home to both problems and resolutions. In a non-lean culture problems are considered a negative, something people try to hide or cover up. On the other hand, in a lean culture an often overheard phrase is, "No problem is a problem." In a lean culture team members are encouraged to find and report problems because if problems are exposed they can be solved. In the lean culture, problems are referred to as "golden nuggets," i.e., something to be treasured.

A final benefit from using a production control board is that it encourages team members to become more engaged in the process. Members are responsible for up-

Production Control Benefits

- 1.** Team member ownership in the process.
- 2.** The production board resides where the work occurs rather than in an off-site office.
- 3.** All team members receive information about the current status of the area
- 4.** "No problem is a problem." Problems are treated as golden nuggets and solved with a vengeance.
- 5.** At the end of each day the team knows whether or not it made progress toward its goals.
- 6.** Normal conditions (measures, goals and actual performance) are separated from abnormal ones and are made known. This allows for management by exception, which makes excellence possible.

dating the information and monitoring the results every day to track progress towards the goals. The expectation is set and the communication is clear. Before the team goes home at the end of the day, it knows where it stands. **MHM**



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