

The Finish Strong™ monthly e-newsletter helps business leaders examine issues important to taking operational performance to world-class levels. Do your Operations deliver your company's espoused competitive advantage to every client on every order?

Finish Strong™ is about developing an appropriate Operations strategy and executing it effectively, dotting operational i's and crossing operational t's as you go.

Your company cannot afford to be sloppy if you want it to be great.

### **DON'T BE LEFT BEHIND**

I just returned from investing 5 full days at the annual AME international conference held in Chicago. Attendees represented 32 countries. One Kenyan business owner I enjoyed meeting told me he found the conference exceedingly valuable to himself and the employees he brought with him. He also remarked that the workshops and presentations identified as beginner and intermediate were in many cases too basic for his company's status, and he especially enjoyed the learning opportunities presented by the advanced sessions.

Yes, that's Kenya as in Africa.

The Peelle Company, a 100 year-old privately-held manufacturer, showed how they had developed a pull system to level load operations. An important step in a make-to-stock environment; a bigger deal in the Peelle world. From standardized and conceptual designs, each Peelle freight elevator door, car gate, and car enclosure is adapted to suit customer size, hoistway space, and loading capacity requirements. Customer required delivery dates fluctuate with the status of construction projects. Because they refuse to believe they are unique, lead-times, on-time delivery and costs are all drastically improved.

Charles Fishman, Fast Company senior author and author of *The Wal-Mart Effect*, discussed the impact of Wal-Mart on its customers, its suppliers, and the environment. The Q&A included questions from an Indian citizen on Wal-Mart's strategy in India, from someone else on how unions would cripple Wal-Mart's business model, and from another on Wal-Mart's challenge with employee benefits. What would your question have been?

And those three conversations combine for significantly under 1% of the meaningful exchanges available at the conference.

How did you and your key employees improve your company last week?

### **YA' THINK?**

Nick Rennie, PHRED Solutions CEO, and I had the pleasure of leading a discussion of "Developing a Viable Problem Solving Culture in Your Company by Learning From Toyota" with the AME Champions Club during the conference.

We focused on the necessary integration of problem solving with knowledge creation, sharing and retention, and the social and technical networks that must be in place to support that. To be at all effective, problem solving must become a standardized business process, just like the operational processes you want to be reliable and repeatable. It's insufficient to simply tell a technical resource: "You're an engineer; go solve the problem!" Just as with other unstandardized processes, your company falls victim to:

- everyone left to their own devices and disparate skill set
- widely varying results,
- unnecessary variation in the process.

Excellence is about how you think, how your employees think, how you all think together, the process you all use to think, and how you develop, share and retain the benefits of that thinking.

John Shook, former Toyota executive and author of numerous Lean books including "Learning to See," along with many other audience members stayed after the presentation to further discuss the concepts we had shared. If you would like a copy of the PowerPoint please email us.

### **PROMISES, PROMISES**

I stayed at the AME conference hotel, the Chicago Hilton, last week while at the conference. On Saturday afternoon I found two typed formal notifications in my room.

The first explained how Hilton's commitment to the environment and sustainability had been demonstrated for several months now by the blue recyclable bag in the closet. They provided statistics on the tons of recycled materials the hotel had processed in 2006. They encouraged me to place all recyclables in the blue bag to support their efforts.

The second explained that they had reprogrammed the alarm clock to automatically "fall back" for the time change and assured me that the time on the clock when I awoke would reflect the change.

Unfortunately, there was no blue bag at any point during my one-week stay, and the clock did not "fall back."

If you don't deliver, it might be best not to go out of your way to promise.