

Problems Plus Creative Input Equal Opportunities

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One day while sitting in a creativity session, I listened to the leader repeatedly say that in order to find unique and creative solutions to difficult challenges, one must get away from the conventional state of mind and thought which is often unimaginative, sober, frustrating, repetitive, and negative. As these concepts were discussed a number of times, it reminded me of the similarity to the day-to-day extrusion problems we all face. They are also frustrating, difficult yet seemingly mundane, repetitive and negative. The nature of the problem, and the patience and persistence required, tends to invite unimaginative suggestions and attempts to use past approaches. If proven creativity techniques have been so successful in solving other very difficult tasks, then why not use them in working on the day-to-day extrusion problems that we all face. Find unique solutions and turn those lemons into lemonade; convert those problems into opportunities.

Problem solving in extrusion requires a systematic approach, where small changes should be made and time allotted to monitor the complete reaction of the process to these changes. Accurate and complete record keeping at every change is an absolute must. Patience and persistence are required, and often only very small improvements occur. Eventually, however, the small improvements add up to a final solution to the problem. This approach should not be changed. However, when the problem is particularly difficult, a new and imaginative approach using techniques that classically generate creative ideas should be tried. The following suggestions may be useful.

Take a few people aside and talk out the problems, with the purpose of generating as many ideas as possible that are even remotely related to the problem. During the idea generating phases, it is of critical importance for everyone to be totally positive. No ideas are bad! (Evaluation comes later, do not attempt to be creative and evaluative at the same time. It simply does not work.) Look for quantity of ideas and not quality at this point. All ideas are good, the best will become obvious later.

Relate the problem to another operation and look for a similar solution. This can stimulate creative thinking toward other ideas. Try humor; extrusion difficulties can try the patience of a saint, so don't be afraid to joke about the problem. Forget the old tried and true techniques that have been attempted for years. Look for unique and new approaches.

Now, and only now, is the time to be evaluative. Write all of the ideas down. Categorize the list, add new thoughts, select the best and go back out to the line and try them.

So, after you stand next to an extruder and down stream processes for hours on end with seemingly little or no progress, do something different...look for a creative solution. You may be too close to the problem. Get away from the trees and look at the forest. Climb up one of the trees and look at things from a different angle. Use your creative talents, but, again, be positive. The solution to your next surging problem may be the future answer to higher output and profitability.

Finally, make an effort to compliment yourself and your colleagues for having taken a positive approach to solve a difficult extrusion problem. Be proud of the fact that you have creatively worked through the frustration and negativism that these processes seem to generate. Your increasingly creative input will generate future opportunities.

- Russ Gould

See also:

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