Shop Foremen

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Most foremen are former line workers with the know-how of setting up and running an extrusion line. They represent key people in your company and can make or break you! Down time is very expensive! It is paramount that these foremen run the lines efficiently. Your rapport with them should be on a high level.

Many have a limited education, but it doesn't mean they can't attain higher levels of knowledge. Day in and day out, the same plastic materials are extruded. Do they have any idea of what's happening when the pellets drop onto the screw and material moves forward, changing from hard to soft pellets and finally moving out of the die like syrup? You can explain, without using technical terms, what is happening inside the barrel. I like to inject some simple theory explaining screw action, cylinder temperatures, die design, and the importance of uniformly cooling the product to avoid built in stresses and distortion, without using any technical terms.

We had lines running rigid PVC, ABS. and polyethylene of varying densities. ABS and the ethylenes ran rather easily, but the PVC was a "sensitive animal". The foremen knew it could burn easily. Once burning started, there was no way it could be corrected. The barrel and die had to be purged, and the machine restarted. Heat history was a term new to many foremen. We ex plained that one heat history meant the material went through the machine once. The foremen learned they had to be careful when adding PVC regrinds.

Your foremen are key workers. Larger and well organized companies have training sessions for foremen and supervisors. There are a multitude of companies who are small, operating with a minimum number of workers who feel they cannot take time to hold training sessions. Many high schools, community colleges, trade schools, etc., offer courses that could be great help to the foremen. It may be worth while for the company to pay for the training. We sent one foreman to a night school to learn simple machine design. After one year, he was placed in the engineering department, assisting the engineers in design work.

It is a good idea to have a six month review with each foreman. Like many of us, we think we are well organized and know all the answers. Be patient and listen in your review. He/she may open up and give you a few pointers you had never known. Don't be too critical with him/her. Carefully explain where that person can improve. Be careful, foremen are harder to acquire than line workers.

Our extrusion and molding plant was small. With the okay by management, I organized monthly meetings with the foremen and supervisors. We had these sessions in a nice restaurant on Saturday mornings (no weekend shifts). This gave foremen a chance to discuss problems that ranged from material extrusion, forming, cooling, and even packaging. By each foreman contributing, it gave them a sense of being part of the team. It was important to have the men pass their knowledge to the line worker. Our meetings were about 1-1/2 hours long. I took notes, which each man received. Sometimes, one foreman was delegated to follow a suggestion made at the meeting regarding a problem on the line. This gave him responsibility and a sense of pride.

A few points to keep in mind:

1. Foremen represent the heart of the production plant.
2. Maintain a good, but disciplined, relationship.
3. Impress upon the foremen that they can have a good future and that their position is not the end of the line.
4. Discuss the possibilities of in-house training sessions with your supervisors. Check with the SPE regarding the training sessions that only take about 2 hours.
5. In a small plant, encourage your fore men to seek more education….trade schools, high schools, community colleges, etc.
6. Take one or more of the foremen to your plastic society meetings. Not only would they learn something, but it would be a real morale booster.
7. Organize your own training session, preferably outside of the plant. Have no more than ten in a session.
8. Records show that training programs for the foremen pay off for management; actually everyone profits.

- Don Biklen

See also:

- Back to basics for profile extrusion
- The importance of periodic audits of extrusion performance

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