

Improving Plant Partnerships

The Foundation Skills for Improving How People Achieve Win/Win Outcomes through
Communication, Trust and Productive Feedback

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Abstract

As maintenance and reliability professionals we strive to provide the highest reliability, at the lowest cost. We do this by getting better and better knowledge of our plant asset condition, reducing the amount of down time required for maintenance and driving other forms of inefficiency from our systems. We employ such tools as preventive and predictive maintenance, reliability engineering and precision maintenance. To be truly effective at these activities we have to have the cooperation and support of other functions or departments within our organization. Plant partnerships refer to the interactions and interdependencies among different groups within an organization. They are about how people work together. In order to establish and sustain productive plant partnerships we have to address how people interact with each other. The most effective way to establish and maintain plant partnerships are in how we communicate, how we develop trust and how we provide feedback among the people and departments within the organization. This paper provides some insight into how to develop your skills in these areas which are often assumed to be common practice but in reality is rarely used effectively.

1 What are Plant Partnerships?

Working together to make the most effective decisions is what plant partnerships are all about. All elements of an organization need to be cognizant of their impact on others; production, corporate finance, quality, etc. Plant partnerships involve the ability of each person and functional area to understand the big picture and how they contribute to, or work against the interests of the organization.

Are you currently in an organization that has a lot of wasted effort, poor relationships among functions (operations, maintenance, finance, etc.) and low morale? These are the tell-tail signs of an organization that does not have strong plant partnerships.

An example of there being ineffective plant partnerships is when the production equipment can produce 1000 units per hour but the sales force promised delivery that would require 1100 units per hour. The sales force asks the production department to “Just crank her up a little bit... We aren't asking for a huge change in production rate!” The production manager concedes without much of a fight because after all, product out the door is why we are in business. For the production shift supervisor, they consider the change and think “The odds are pretty good the increased rate won't cause the equipment to die on my shift.” But nobody has consulted the equipment; the production assets that are being asked to undergo additional stress.

Operating equipment at higher stress levels invariably results in accelerated times to failure. And failure will occur at a random, less predictable time. The result of course is lower overall plant reliability, higher unit production costs and perhaps multiple unhappy customers.

What role should plant partnerships have played in the above scenario? First, the sales force should know what the plant is generally capable of and avoid making delivery promises that exceed plant capabilities. Conversely, the production department could have looked for alternatives (multiple shift production, outsourcing, etc.). The maintenance staff may need to find better and better ways to improve reliability, in turn this supports the sales staff by driving towards increased production rates while driving towards becoming the lowest cost producer (perhaps through on-line monitoring, predictive maintenance, Root Cause Analysis, etc.).

Plant partnerships are a means to keep the organization working together for a common goal; not being motivated by short term or unilateral functional goals.

1.1 Effects of Poor Plant Partnerships on People

Have you ever been part of an organization where people hoarded resources? In this environment, titles and budgets become more important than producing the best product at the lowest cost. Managers spend time contemplating how they can get more people in their group and what they need to do to control bigger pieces of the budget pie.

From an hourly worker's perspective they take the brunt of the inefficiencies caused by weak plant partnerships. They understand what makes sense and what doesn't. Managers who are caught up in optimizing their function make decisions to position themselves more than to support the business objectives. It's tough for others to anticipate individual goals as opposed to common goals. This results in frequent changes in work schedules, low trust and lower morale. For the tool box toting craftsmen, this feels like being the ball in a pinball game; never enough time to do things right, conflicting priorities, inefficient... ineffective.

Supervisors guess at decisions based on what they interpret the current mood to be. They dread having to jerk the hourly workforce around from one priority to the next. To gain a measure of control supervisors begin to build informal networks. These networks help supervisors to better anticipate what is coming and to know what the current priorities are.

Many of these supervisors and hourly workers have been burned after sticking their neck out to do the right thing for the business; they won't do that again!

In this insecure world of downsizing, right-sizing and reengineering it is no wonder that some managers place the functional performance cart before the organizational performance horse.

Also realize that many of the experienced managers and leaders of today learned to manage before kaizen and other progressive techniques became main stream. They have lived through many more failed initiatives than successful ones. These are the folks that are the toughest to win over when trying to change behaviors in an organization.

Leaders set the tone of the organization; the cultural DNA. Leaders put policies in place to reward or punish. In organizations with poor plant partnerships it is clearly the leadership that has most of the responsibility. If the organization is not working as one team it is leadership's responsibility to take corrective action. In the case of plant partnerships, leaders must develop the means to improve and/or sustain strong plant partnerships; to improve the cultural climate, support efficient activities, and improve morale. This ultimately supports the drive towards optimized results.

1.2 Focusing On Common Goals

A distinguishing feature of organizations with strong plant partnerships is that they have common goals. As Jim Collins wrote in his popular book "Good to Great", in order to get momentum it is necessary to have everyone pushing on the organizational flywheel in the same direction. It is leadership's job to establish and imbed the organization's common goals. Common goals are the foundation on which the organization can build great teamwork.

Establishing common goals should be done in a straightforward manner. Common goals should be easily understood by hourly workers, supervisors, managers and the leadership team. These goals should be presented in such a way that it allows all employees to make value driven decisions. This means that if a person is faced with a decision they should first consider the common goals and act in support of the common goals. A person that is educated on organizational common goals is far more likely to make the right decision; one that supports plant objectives and tends toward highest quality at the lowest cost.

Even when common goals have been established, they are frequently lost in the sea of day to day activities. The underlying reason is that the culture has not been established to sustain focus on the common goals. This happens when we don't have a mutual support among team members that keep these common goals in the forefront of our decision making. In the absence of mutual support overall performance will degrade.

Another observation is that it is easier to form trusted relationships with a small group of peers than to trust departments or divisions. We have stronger alliances to people than to policy. If someone that we know asks us to deviate from service level agreements or policy we tend to do so because we want to support our comrades. This is often in conflict with common goals. We do the wrong thing for the right reason.

When the organization has common goals we need tools to sustain them. This is where the foundation skills come into play. The foundation skills that support plant partnerships are communication, trust and productive feedback. We will now look into these foundation skills in detail.

2 Plant Partnership Skills

2.1 Basic Communication

Communication is more complex than we may think. It is difficult to put our internal perceptions, feelings, motives, etc. into meaningful and accurate words. We often misunderstand messages from others because we interpret them through the filter of our own attitudes, feelings, motives and experiences. Non-verbal behaviors may communicate a different message than our words; which often results in mixed messages.

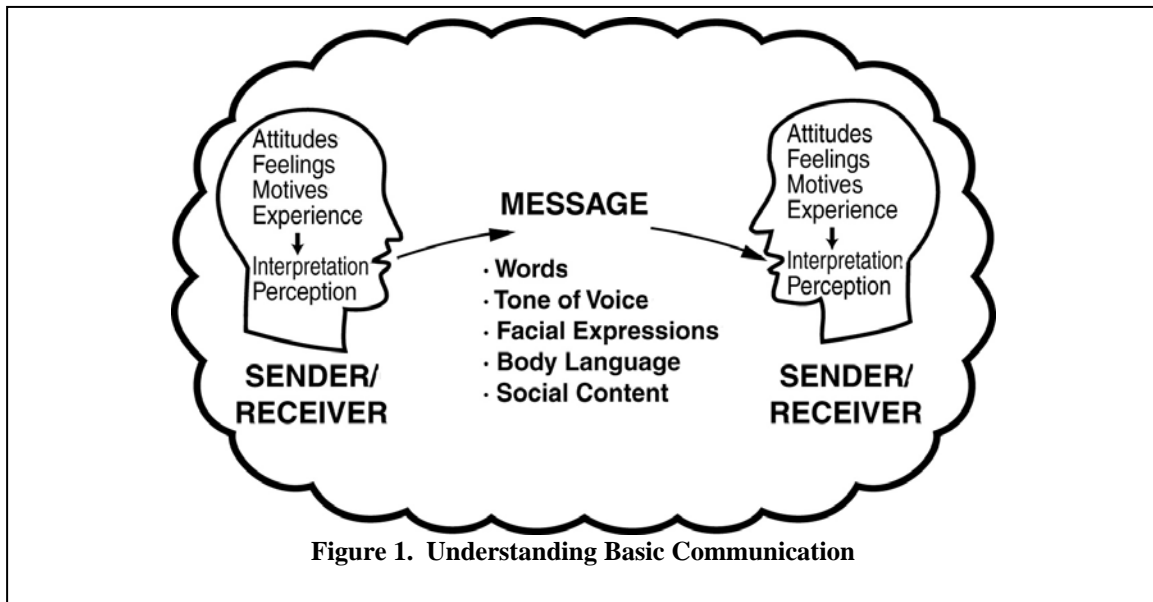
Basic communication is often assumed to be a core skill that everyone possesses. This is not the case. Unless time is taken to ensure others fully understand what we intend to communicate you cannot be certain that the information has been conveyed correctly.

Here's a real life example. My 14 year old son and I were discussing the weather in central Florida. I made the statement that during the middle of the summer thunderstorms were a nearly daily occurrence. Because this conversation occurred on July 28th I assumed he considered us to be in the middle of the summer as I did (June to September being the summer season). But to a 14 year old on summer break from school – where school starts again in early August – in his mind we are emphatically at the end of the summer season. After a couple of targeted questions we understood each others frame of reference and the conversation continued. Of course I was still wrong in his mind, but at least we came to a common understanding.

In the workplace the same sorts of communication issues come up. In addition they are compounded by real or perceived emergencies, seniority, egos, background noise and a number of other factors increase the complexity of communicating correctly.

The single best way to improve your communication skills is to be an active listener. Fortunately there is a model for active listening and it goes like this:

- Draw the other person out. Use door openers such as "Could you explain what you mean by that?", or "Tell me more."
- Use encouraging feedback such as "I see" and "Yes, please go on" get the other person to elaborate on their thoughts.



- Become actively involved in the conversation. Focus your complete attention on the speaker. Make eye contact, nod and change facial expressions to indicate understanding of the information the speaker is providing.
- Be aware of your body language; maintain an open/relaxed posture, lean forward, avoid physical barriers and tune out distractions.
- Search for meaning behind the words. Decode the message. Try to perceive the speakers feelings. Discover the real meaning behind the words.
- Confirm your understanding. Acknowledge the message that was sent; verbal and non-verbal. Restate or paraphrase the message back to the sender so that your interpretation of the information can be confirmed.
- Bring closure to the exchange. Summarize the conversation and state your position on what has been discussed. Agree on actions to be taken as necessary.

The objective is to be sure the version of what you heard is the correct version by validating your understanding with the sender. The more important the discussion, the more time you need to spend making sure you are on the same page.

This is especially true when you are managing others. As a manager you don't have time, nor should you try, to be directly supervising everything that's going on. You have to lay out expectations, ensure the means are provided and assume the objectives will be met. If you are a good communicator, your chances of getting more done with less supervision and re-work are much higher. Practice these communication techniques and you will be amazed at how many problems go away.

2.2 Trust

Normally in team sports competition both sides are playing with a relatively high degree of teamwork. This is true of soccer, baseball, football and many other team sports. When one team is playing against another it is a zero-sum game or win/lose situation. Zero-sum games are a way of life in our society. Someone wins at someone else's expense. When your team wins a basketball game, you win at the opposing team's expense. The same zero-sum game is played in our court system and our political system; someone wins, someone loses. In industry, one company is the industry leader and the others are not.

Most organizations are caught up in internal zero-sum activities and may not even be aware they are doing it. Consider the typical plant setting where there are five or six functional divisions. Each function has their own objectives and each function is typically rewarded for achieving their target performance within their function. At first this may appear to be the proper way to motivate the division.

The problem with this scenario is that the functions are actually in competition with other functions in their own company. It is as though a basketball team was made up of five players that did not pass the ball to each other, didn't set picks and refused to defend against their opponents. Each player was only interested in scoring baskets for themselves. It would not be a pretty sight.

Building trust is a critical part of developing high performing teams. Trust is about developing win/win relationships while accomplishing the mission of the organization. In order to have the confidence to take risks you must develop trust in your leaders and trust in those you work with. It is important to understand the trust issues that your organization has deal with them.

When we compensate or reward behaviors of a sub-group what we are really doing is creating an internal zero-sum game. Functions will be scrambling to attain the greatest advantage with regard to company resources; which is not to say they will be overly concerned with the best organizational (team) use of those resources. The only way your organization can win is if the functions collaborate and work together for the best advantage of the organization.

Trust is having confidence in your relationship with others. If we have common goals throughout our organization, we have to develop trusting relationships among people and functions to sustain these goals.

A useful example to keep in mind is what happens when you try to gain the trust of an animal. Consider a neighbor's dog that is initially distrustful of you. You cannot simply call the dog over and begin petting and playing with the dog. The animal needs to gradually build a relationship. Perhaps the first time you interact you call to the dog in a non-threatening manner with the owner present. Next you bring some biscuits or other treats that you throw to the animal from a distance. Gradually you throw the treats a shorter and shorter distance until the animal comes within your reach. As the dog gets comfortable with your being within its comfort zone the animal is building trust with you.

Steven Covey, the author of "Seven Habits of Highly Effective People", talks a great deal about "emotional bank accounts". He explains that there is an emotional bank account in our relationships with others. When the account has a high balance there is trust in the relationship. Conversely, when the balance is low, there is very low trust. If the balance gets too low, the account is closed.

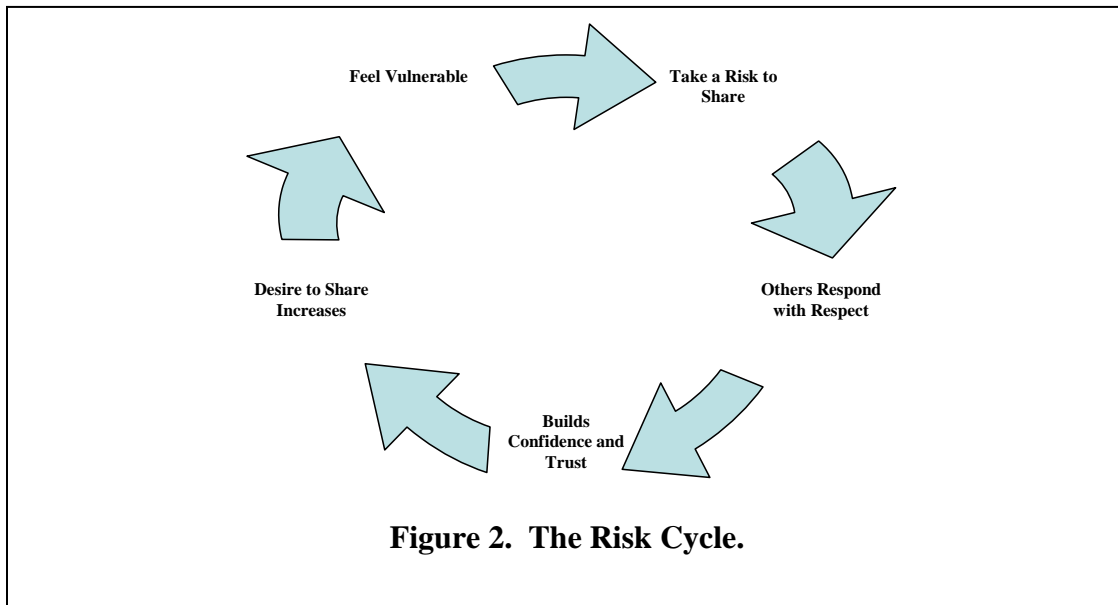
We make withdrawals and deposits into and from the emotional bank account when we act negatively or positively in risk/trust interactions. A co-worker may have a low balance in their account (either because there is limited history with this person, or because they have burned you before). If he/she does not reciprocate your trust and respect with trust and respect you are more likely to close that account. If a person you know well, and that has a large balance in their account, does not reciprocate respect you probably don't close the account; you probably look for justifications of their position or discuss the matter openly. You wouldn't typically close the account when the balance is high.

The following items are the ways in which you can avoid the win/lose cycle and establish the baseline trust that results in win/win situations:

1. Listen empathetically.
2. Find out what is important to the other person.
3. Agree on clear, common goals.
4. Avoid absolute statements; such as "it's not possible" or "you're not right".
5. Involve others who are affected.
6. Make consensus or collaborative decisions.
7. Test trade-offs and compromises for agreement.
8. Look for similarities and areas of commonality.
9. Avoid potential win-lose situations or strategies.
10. Think "our problem" not "my problem" or "your problem".

The Risk Cycle Model is presented in figure 2 to help you focus on the process of building trust. It starts when one person is exposed or feels vulnerable to a potentially negative situation and recognizes that some form of help or assistance from another person or group would be in order. A decision is made to be open and honest with those that might help - you take a risk to share your burden. When there is trust, openness is rewarded with a respectful response; a sincere offer to assist in forming a solution. The sincere response builds confidence and trust between the parties. When confidence in your relationships with others increases it increases your desire to share more issues. The next time you feel vulnerable you are more willing to take the risk of sharing because you now have positive experiences to support your decision.

So what happens when you take a risk and it is not met with mutual respect? It will of course happen because people are not equally enlightened; people mature in their trust relationships at different rates and have differing experiences and risk tolerances. When you meet with such a situation the real test begins. If the cycle is broken you must continue along the "high road". Don't give up; don't exact revenge against the non-respecting offender. Keep trying. If you attempt to get revenge the situation will deteriorate further in a negative, downward spiral. To avoid this situation have open discussions and continue to use the Risk Cycle Model.



Trust comes from building confidence with the other person and continuing to make deposits into the account. It may take a number of deposits over a significant period of time before a strong relationship of trust can be built. Covey points out that there has to be multiple deposits for every withdrawal (one “Oh Darn” wipes out one thousand atta boys is a familiar phrase that applies here). Be patient because this method can and does work. Here is a list of activities that enable deposits into your emotional bank account:

- Act with trust and confidence.
- Take risks and share them with others.
- Respond to others taking risks with respect and trust.
- Have an entering opinion that others are open and honest with you.
- Be forgiving.
- Understand that others feel vulnerable when they take risks as well.
- Respond with appreciation that others are taking a risk in sharing their concern with you.

Every organization is different. Many organizations do not have a culture that initially supports trust. In those situations you may only be able to influence your circle of people that you interact with. You never know how much you can effect an organization with trust until you start fostering an environment that supports trust.

2.3 Giving & Receiving Feedback

Closely related to communication and trust are the skills of giving and receiving feedback. If you have good communication skills and you are in a trusting environment giving and receiving feedback is much easier. Communication skills allow you to project what you really

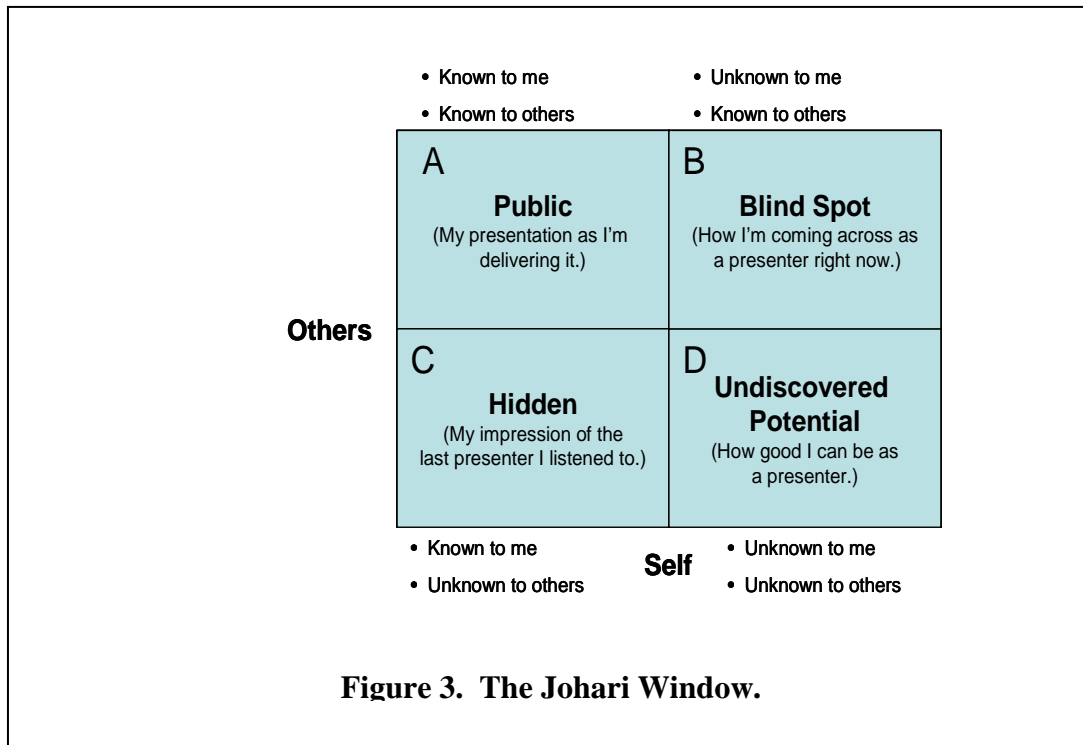
intend to express and to make sure you understand the messages being sent to you. Trust allows you and others to have frank discussions honestly meant to improve situations. Feedback is not something you do to provide only negative feedback.

Feedback is two-way; giving and receiving. It is one of the most important skills to master in interpersonal relationships. Feedback is your friend; it is through feedback that we see ourselves as others see us. It is also through feedback that other people know how we see themselves. Productive feedback then depends on communication and is an enabler of trust.

Appropriate feedback can be the spark that inspires important personal changes in the lives of co-workers and loved ones. People that you interact with on a daily basis are the best sources of feedback. Again, we have a model for understanding why feedback is so critical

Refer to figure 3; the diagram is known as the Johari Window¹. Quadrant A is the public area. This consists of information known to you and known to others. An example would be the information in this paper. I see and understand it and you can too (I hope). Quadrant B is a person’s blind spot. Something can be unknown to me, but known to others. An example is your level of appreciation of this article; you know what you think but it is unknown to me. Quadrant C is my hidden area. It includes what is known to me but unknown to others. An example is what I really think about a person I met. Quadrant D is my undiscovered potential area; an example is how good can I be at playing the piano (since I don’t currently know how to do that) – it is unknown to me and unknown to others.

¹ The Johari Window was originally developed by Joe Luft and Harry Ingram (Joe + Harry = Johari), two interpersonal psychologists.



What do you need to take away from this model?

- The more I increase my public window (A), the less blind I am, the less I have to worry about keeping things hidden, the more I may discover parts of me that are positive attributes.
- I can't reduce my blind area without help from others; I need feedback.
- If I am to help others by reducing their blind spots, I must learn to give helpful feedback.
- In order to help me reduce my blind area, others must share some of their hidden area with me.
- The mutual feedback process requires good communication skills, builds trust and strengthens team relations.

So what is the right way to give feedback?

- First share your desire to give feedback. Look for an invitation to provide it.
- Find a quiet place where you will not be interrupted and will not be in plain sight of others.
- Describe your perceptions and observations using a three part message:
 1. "When you [insert a description of the behavior, without judgment]..."

2. "I feel [insert how the person's behavior affects you]..."

3. "Because I [describe why the behavior affects you the way it does]."

- Then use your active listening skills to carefully understand the other person's point of view.
- Come to agreement on the ways to handle similar issues in the future.
- Thank the person for the opportunity to share their point of view and suggest a follow up discussion after the next opportunity to try the new behaviors.

Characteristics of giving effective feedback include:

- Must be requested
- Must be timely
- Must be accurate.
- Must be specific
- Must be appropriate
- Must be useful

Requested feedback means that the feedback is wanted or expected rather than imposed or suddenly sprung on the person receiving the information. If the person intended to benefit from the feedback is not open to it, it is best to try another time.

Timely refers to when the feedback is given. It should be as close as possible to the event(s); you may need to be patient if tempers are still hot, but don't wait too long.

Being accurate means that you need to make sure of the facts before giving feedback. Be very careful not to exaggerate or distort the message. If you give inaccurate feedback it will lower the trust that you have worked hard to establish.

Being specific means that the detail must be sufficient for the person receiving the feedback to understand exactly what is meant (a link to communication skills).

Appropriateness refers to providing feedback that is relevant to the situation. The feedback needs to provide in the right setting so the person receiving the feedback is at ease. Sometimes the person giving the feedback can run into a buzz saw (a highly emotional or aggressive response). Being in an environment where you can talk freely, but privately can be critical to the exchange and to overcome defensiveness.

For feedback to be useful the person receiving the feedback must be able to do something with the information your providing. Do they have the time, knowledge, resources, etc. to take advantage of this new information?

So what is the proper method to receive feedback?

- Breathe. Don't get yourself worked up. Feedback is a good thing.
- Listen with a desire to understand the other person's point of view.
- Paraphrase what you hear to make sure you understand the message correctly.
- Share your thoughts on the matter in a non-defensive manner.
- Seek and discuss ways to improve.
- Thank the person for sharing with you.

3 Summary

Communication and trust are the cornerstones of building good relationships between people. It is the cornerstone for plant partnerships. As a maintenance and reliability professional you have a vested interest in achieving win/win outcomes that are aligned with common organizational goals. You need to know the tools of the people skills trade to influence others in a positive manner. This allows you to have a broader impact, outside your formal area of responsibility. And after all, isn't it better to influence people from a positive trust-based standpoint than from a position of power?

You, as a maintenance/reliability supervisor, manager or other professional know that you can only affect a certain level of performance by yourself. We may not have the authority to dictate production schedules, sales or capital

project design decisions. In order for us to do our job, we have to communicate clearly, we have to be trusted by our co-workers, and we have to be open to giving and receiving feedback.

People generally find it difficult to discuss people skills openly. They may feel that their organization expects them to know how to employ basic communication, how to build trust and how to give and receive feedback. You might even feel uncomfortable when you first try these new skills.

Most organizations do a very poor job in educating their employees on these issues. If you want proof check out how many others in your plant are currently practicing these techniques. During your next day back on the job; consciously think about how communication, trust and feedback are used in the day to day routine in your facility. Look for missed opportunities. Each time you see something being re-done look for the communication root cause. How many checklists and re-inspections are in place to ensure compliance? How much did you really get out of your last performance evaluation feedback session?

On your second day back begin to applying the techniques; commit to doing so not just for a day or a week. Commit to them for at least six months. Act with confidence knowing that these are proven techniques. Also recognize that you now know more about building plant partnerships than 95% of your fellow workers, supervisors and managers.

Plant partnerships are difficult to maintain even when you are doing the foundation things right; because you are only one person. You have to engage others in your organization and share these "secrets". Be diligent in developing more productive plant partnerships in all corners of the organization. Lead by example.