

## LEARNING FROM PLANT VISITS

At the recent AME conference I had the opportunity to co-facilitate a tour of the Toyota Parts Distribution Center near Boston. While Toyota described the thought process behind the parts presentation device for awkward truck exhaust systems and the magnet based takt board that highlights problems within 12 minutes, a few tour attendees grouched about the lack of automation.

There are many reasons to visit the operations of another company. A supplier audit, the study of a specific operational tool, an overall observation of operations, or any other valid reason for a visit can become a colossal waste of time if not planned properly.

Before scheduling a visit, be clear on what you intend to get out of it. Build the visit team around that purpose and assign specific responsibilities to ensure the goal is met. If your entire group is observing everything there is too much that will be missed by everyone. Build a checklist of categories that are important to reaching your goal. Then assign observation of each category. The category list will vary depending on the goal of a specific visit.

For example, the categories for one visit could include: (1) safety, cleanliness and order, (2) material handling, use of space (3) maintenance of equipment and tools (4) visual management (5) scheduling and inventory levels, and (6) teamwork and motivation. Assign each category to a member of the visit team. Even if you're the only one visiting, defined categories can sharpen your observations.

For the Toyota tour, a goal of "find out how they use state of the art technology" could have been met before flying to Boston. Students of the Toyota philosophy would not expect to see bleeding edge technology at a Toyota facility. Some plant visits simply shouldn't be made. Make sure your next one is a good use of resources.

## HOW THINGS ARE MADE

Ever want to show someone a picture of a manufacturing process as you try to explain what you do? Or maybe get a better understanding for yourself of a specific process? Stanford University's Alliance for Creative Manufacturing has an on-line video with short clips on the making of common items like bottles and candy as well as manufacturing processes ranging from investment casting to broaching. Take a quick look. It may even be helpful for new employees or candidates.