

BUSY ≠ PRODUCTIVE

Since we were kids working jobs while in high school, many of us were told “look busy when the boss is around.” Many of us have a work ethic that says to earn our pay we should “keep busy” every minute we’re on the clock. Unfortunately, that mindset can keep a company mired in quicksand as its competitive advantage slips away. Busy is not the same as productive, and most dangerously, busy can sap time and energy that could have been used to think about a better way.

Taiichi Ohno’s 1978 book Toyota Production System reminds us of the power of observation and thought. Efficiency is not the result of concentrating on how to do something faster but rather on finding the best overall method. Asking a worker to document his work instructions so that someone else can understand them forces the worker to think about what he does. It’s hard to improve something if you don’t think about it. “Drive-by changes” are not as effective

as observation-based understanding coupled with purpose driven thinking.

Employees need time to think if they are to contribute to improving your operations. Let them know it’s okay, in fact it is expected, to think about the best method for accomplishing the value-added activities of their team. You want them productive, not busy.

KNOW-HOW IS NOT ENOUGH

Know-how without know-why only has value if conditions are static. That is why now-useless reports keep getting run after new systems are implemented; it’s why initial gains from kaizen blitzes sometimes slip away. If you would like to eliminate some busy (an unproductive) work, one easy way is to ask employees to begin to explain the “why” part of some of their more time consuming work. I’ve yet to find a company without forms filled out and reports generated that go nowhere besides the trash.