



Reliability Center, Inc.
www.Reliability.com
804-458-0645
info@reliability.com

Making “Acronyms” Work

Robert J. Latino, EVP Strategic Development, RCI

Abstract: As in any point in time, we are surrounded by new initiatives represented by some new acronym. We are faced with decisions as to how to improve our respective situations with all of these technologies available. Which are fads and which have substance? Which progress our situations and which merely maintain them? If I apply them, will they work in my facility as at others? We will explore the rationalization and reasoning behind such concerns in this article.

The Acronym Wars

Let’s take a snapshot in time and look at some of the acronyms that are floating around today in industry just to show the difficult decisions that we face. P/PM (Preventive/Predictive Maintenance), RCA (Root Cause Analysis), TPM (Total Productive Maintenance), RCM (Reliability-Centered Maintenance), TQM (Total Quality Management) and a host of others. All of these methodologies have their respective merits and have produced results in given environments. But how do we decide which to implement and how?

The Human Common Denominator: Acronym Implementation

The common denominator here is the human being! As we all know, if we REALLY want something, we will make sure that it happens. It becomes a personal will to accomplish it! This is true of any initiative, any acronym implementation or the like; they require a champion, leader or mentor. Someone has to have the desire and passion to drive the process all the way through the organization.

This does not merely mean that someone writes a check and then says everyone must now do what we say. A true leader will make people **want** to accept the new methodology, versus **have** to. The true mark of a leader will be their understanding of the need to have the people accept the change, and then ensure that management demonstrates their commitment by supporting the change.

No matter what new technology comes on the market, rest assured that if people’s value systems do not accept it and if they do not understand it, then it will fail. Take enterprise asset management systems such as SAP. The applied technology is phenomenal for the potential of such a system in industry. Yet during my consultancy travels, I constantly hear of the dislike for the change to SAP.

This is not a reflection one-way or the other about SAP. What it demonstrates is people’s lack of understanding about the new technology, its benefits and most importantly, how to operate or use it. Most of this lack of understanding is a lack of planning and communication from the top to the bottom. Signing a check does not guarantee buy-in. We can bet that the individuals that who sign million dollar checks do not desire that the money be spent in vain. They expect a bottom line benefit.

Setting Training Expectations

So when we commit to spending money on new technologies, what is our expectation? How do we measure success, in terms of spending the money? In engineering projects we outline a specific Return of Investment (ROI). In selling new initiatives we build a business case to cost justify the proposed implementation. What about training dollars? How many companies do we ever hear of that set definitive ROI expectations on the training dollars spent?

Training is generally the communicating of how new technology is to benefit the company and its employees, and also how it works. Training is the interface between new technology and its successful application. So why is it treated so trivially?

When economic times take a downturn, which is the first budget to be slashed? Training! Shouldn't this be the time when we need training the most? This is time when our technologies must shine in an effort to reduce costs and increase production.

Oftentimes we see the paradigm at play where “if we spend money on something tangible like a new piece of equipment, I can see value because I can literally see what I paid for”. However, what comes to mind when we spend money on training? Usually **cost** is the driving factor, not value. After all, how can I measure if I change a person's perspective of how to do their job better? This is an intangible and I believe the most valuable to any company on earth, raising the overall skill level of the workforce.

Imagine if we were able to optimize the application of all the new technologies available on the market for the betterment of our companies. We would see growth beyond belief. However, such optimization is often limited because of the restraining perspectives and low priorities afforded to skill-based training.

I have oftentimes seen at client sites where safety training is mandated by some regulatory agency. When talking with the students of this training, the common paradigm is expressed, “the mind can take what butt can endure”. They are tired on seeing the same formatted material year after year just to be in compliance. Think about the resources allocated to have this training. There are obvious instructional and material costs, but more importantly we have taken highly paid and skilled employees from the field for a period of time. This is the greatest cost.

When we hold such training, what expectations do we provide the students for performance? Do they ever have to demonstrate the skill learned in the classroom, or was it just good to know information? These are the things commonly missing from training.

If we are going to be taking these people out of the field for this time, taking up classroom space and paying for instructors and course materials, then why should we not expect a definitive return? Surely the minimum return should be a certain number of times the initial investment. Add up the loaded salaries, the course cost, the logistical arrangements, the meals and travel and the like, and that is the initial investment.

Write a letter to students ahead of time letting them know:

1. The nature of the training
2. The time and location
3. The management's expectations for returns
4. The time line to realize returns

Once they know what is expected of them they will know what the target looks like. They know the “rules of the game” and can now play. Expectations also provide a basis of measurement. How well will the students perform against the performance expectations outlined?

We also typically find that once expectations are set, students tend to pay more attention in class and focus on the implementation. We find that informing the students that a “class reunion” will be held within two months of the initial training also adds to their attentiveness. If we really want to grab their attention, we can tie their performance as a result of their training to an accomplishment in their performance evaluations. These are all

just ideas that have worked for us before, but the point is that without setting expectations for training, we return to our same reactive environments and never apply the new learning.

Training and Learning

Training and learning are two different issues. Training for the sake of training is the same as compliance to requirements.

Formal learning requires neural connections to be made in the brain to store in memory. Many times learning comes from natural response to an actual event. The brain does not distinguish between actual and simulated events. Therefore, in training, if we “learn” by simulating such conditions and demonstrating the skill, we form the neural connection in our brain. The proper response is then stored and when we do experience an actual event, our learned response will come into play.

Robert J. Latino is Senior Vice-president of Strategic Development and a Senior Consultant for Reliability Center, Inc. Mr. Latino is a practitioner of root cause analysis in the field with his clientele as well as an educator. Mr. Latino is an author of RCI's Root Cause Analysis Methods© training and co-author of Problem Solving Methods© training. Mr. Latino has been published in numerous trade magazines on the topic of root cause analysis as well as a frequent speaker on the topic at trade shows and conferences. His most recent publication is titled "Root Cause Analysis - Improving Performance for Bottom Line Results" He can be contacted at 804/458-0645 or blatino@reliability.com.

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