Leadership lessons from the Caribbean

Global energy company CEO instructs and inspires with a message about creating a ‘reliability culture’ in the workplace.

STLE’S CARIBBEAN SECTION (HEADQUARTERED IN TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO) hosted a multiday technical education course earlier this spring focusing on how to increase equipment reliability in a plant setting. The 66 participants in the program, much like students at numerous other section lube schools, enjoyed the opportunity to connect with each other and learn from expert instructors.

While the format and purpose were familiar, this education program added a unique touch that set the tone for the course and that bears repeating for a much broader audience. This something extra was a keynote address by Charles Percy, managing director and CEO of Methanex Trinidad Ltd. This is the local subsidiary of Methanex Corp., the world’s largest supplier of methanol to major international markets. Methanol is a liquid petrochemical that is used to make countless industrial and consumer products and is increasingly found in the energy sector.

Methanex’s operation in Trinidad and Tobago produces 2.5 million tons of methanol per year, making this an important production center in the organization’s network. In fact, the 10-year-old plant exports 100 percent of its methanol production, contributing to Trinidad and Tobago’s position as the world’s leading exporter of methanol.

The audience for Percy’s keynote address to the Trinidad group included STLE President Robert Heverly (Vanderbilt Chemicals), STLE director of professional development Robert Gresham and me. Our duties during the three-day trip to the island nation, in addition to participating in the education course, included helping to dedicate a new tribology lab at the University of the West Indies. Funds for this project were provided by the STLE Caribbean Section, working in conjunction with the National Petroleum Marketing Co. of Trinidad and Tobago, an STLE corporate member. The STLE team also attended an awards dinner hosted by STLE director Kuarlal Rampersad that honored the reliability conference participants and others involved in section activity and course instructors.

Topics and techniques covered by those instructors were invaluable to the students. But the message that tied it all together in terms of why this training is crucial came from Mr. Percy, the Methanex CEO. Part of his appeal was based on a basic economic assessment of why prudent asset management is important to a person in his job. His plant has the capacity to produce 5,000 tons of methanol per day. At the current prevailing price, that’s $2.5 million dollars (U.S.) lost per day if the plant cannot operate due to equipment problems.

This commitment to reliability extends throughout the company. He told the students, “Reliability is not a part of the maintenance department. It’s an operating style that extends to every part of the enterprise.” The key to that operating style, in his view, is simple: “Create metrics that you can measure. Once you do that, you can manage what you measure and improve the operation.”

Now since most of the people reading this are not global CEOs and do not work in a methanol plant, what’s the broader message? Two things are the take-away, in my view. First, excellence always starts at the top of an organization. Clear objectives make for ongoing success, as evidenced by the track record at Methanex. The second point, which can be even more broadly applied, is to make a personal commitment to grow your skills with an eye toward playing your part in organizational success.

STLE is ready to be your ally along the way by offering a variety of outstanding technical training programs—whether at a local venue like the Trinidad event or at the STLE annual meeting education program. That’s our commitment to making the STLE value proposition—Connect, Learn, Achieve—come alive for you.

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