



Asking the *right* questions

Alan Laduzinsky learns how Brooks Food Group's Run Right program gets employees involved in all aspects of production

Brooks Food Group is headquartered in Bedford, VA, with a facility there and another in Monroe, NC. It annually delivers about 100 million pounds of par-cooked breaded product to the foodservice industry, primarily east of the Mississippi River. Its customers demand that Brooks products—which range from appetizers and sides to entrees to desserts and snacks—be price-competitive and have a consistent appearance.

To keep its leading position in the competitive foodservice market, Brooks Food Group recently implemented a continuous improvement strategy that has enabled the company to increase plant efficiency by 13 percent in a year-over-year comparison. The same continuous improvement process resulted in an 8 percent reduction in plant downtime and a 6 percent increase in product yield.

Brooks calls its program “Run Right.” It empowers work teams by instilling greater awareness and ownership of operations. Team members include production, maintenance, and quality control people, who engage in the decision-making process to improve plant floor performance.

Brooks’ Run Right program uses a scoreboard system prepared and administered by the teams to monitor production line performance and improvements in terms of efficiency, product quality, and downtime. The teams identify

opportunities for improvement, then they discuss problems and, based on the scoreboard inputs, make changes to improve operations.

Joe Leah, who instituted the Run Right process, says that the process “begins at the start of each shift.” A maintenance man and a team leader walk the production line to ensure the line is running right. If they identify a problem, they fix it so the line runs perfectly. Once the line is running to their satisfaction, they post and maintain information on a scoreboard that monitors their efficiencies. “We have really seen an impact in the business and production volume,” says Leah.

Mark Browley, the third shift team leader at Brooks’ Bedford plant, says, “The Run Right program empowers employees to become aware of operations and gets them involved in the many aspects of the business’s success, rather than just to focus on the one job they were hired to do. “It helps us measure line performance and get feedback about how well we’re operating when we make a change. On the third shift we find out what problems the second shift has encountered. We then walk the production line from start to end and make changes to fix any existing problems before we start it up. This way we set up each shift for success. My personal experience has been to see an increase in productivity and quality, and a significant reduction in downtime.

Above, left to right
Bread for French Toast Sticks entering bread slicer to be cut into sticks; bread sticks about to enter batter machine; French Toast Sticks on the scaler/bagger machine

"We use the scoreboard, which compared a desired standard of efficiency versus our actual production for each hour," Browley continues. "We look at our whole product, and our product giveaway. We also look at our Statistical Process Control (SPC) charts and our giveaway. Involving workers in all parts of production gives them empowerment and adds to their desire to help the company succeed."

Leah adds, "We initiated Run Right to make workers aware of all aspects of operations. People meet at the scoreboard. Here they have an opportunity to discuss problems and develop solutions. For instance, we want to achieve 100 percent productivity. We will not leave that board without an action plan to get to 100 percent. The scoreboard has a place to write down an action plan and indicate its owner. It creates a focus on a line's performance before it even starts."

"We also added a measurement for yield," Leah continues. "As a result, we found out that we were giving a significant amount of product away. This saved the company a significant amount of money."

Browley says, "We generally have a product line change on my shift, so we plan to have the necessary parts and operations change techniques needed to make the product line change to minimize downtime."

While the system appears to be totally manual, Leah says, "There is technology that supports the Run Right system. The company plans to add new technology to get information to the scoreboard faster and more often."

"In a sense, it's a matter of asking the right questions," Leah explains. "You identify your key performance measures, you make sure they are on the scoreboard, and you use this to determine how you're performing and then ask the right questions to get to the next level." ■