

HOW TO BE A GREAT PRODUCTION MANAGER

By Dave Luehr | November 5, 2019

Whether you operate a small shop or a big shop, someone has to manage all those cars and people out in the shop – you might as well get great at it, right? Seriously, production is where you earn the money the people in the front office sold. Your job is to retain as much of that money as possible during the repair process and far too many shops are flying by the seat of their pants!

Does this sound familiar? Back in the eighties and nineties, I prided myself on my ability to get every car to go home on Friday, regardless of how many trips to the junk yard and dealership parts departments it took. By the end of the day, I was completely pooped, but not so much that I couldn't join my employees for a congratulatory beer to celebrate our hard-fought Friday victory. Wow, if I only realized how ignorant I was back then!

This kind of daily crises management is literal insanity that has been adopted by far too many collision repairers as “normal.” Production Management has just become a fancy word for the shop's primary fire-fighter. Truth is, most of the production managers I observe spend 90% of their days dealing with crises that shouldn't exist in the first place! Are you ready to stop the madness?!

The Role of a Great Production Manager

Let me start by saying that the role a “production manager” depends somewhat on the size of the shop and number of people working there. For many of you reading this, you may be the owner, the estimator, and the production manager as well as the chief bottle washer. So, for the sake of this article, I am primarily talking about the hat you wear when managing or coordinating your repair production system and the people working in it.

There are many reasons for excess crises to exist in a collision repair facility including: poor communication, poor culture and leadership, poor building and equipment maintenance, poor planning, poor quality, etc. While all these things need to be addressed, I am going to give you four operational areas that if done properly, would end 90% of your crises immediately!

1. Scheduling to an optimum work-in-process (WIP) level.

When a shop has more cars on the property than they can possibly work on, bad things happen. A good production manager should know how to schedule repairs into their system and maintain the right number of vehicles or labor hours in process. The old “grab the keys” mentality is a major cause of pain for most repairers in the U.S.

Keep in mind, the only vehicles you are earning money on are the ones being touched out in the shop. All the others only cost you money. Why would you do this to yourself?

If this is something you need help on, watch our free [scheduling webinar here](#).

2. Proper damage analysis.

Once you have the correct amount of WIP, it becomes much easier to spend the time required to properly analyze damaged vehicles. I think pretty much everyone knows how important this is to successful workflow, yet not many shop leaders have the discipline to make it happen consistently.

A great production manager insists that the necessary time is dedicated to repair planning, because he or she knows how much fire-fighting this activity eliminates.

3. Parts management.

This is an area that I feel production managers spend too much time dealing with because the previous two areas need improvement. Parts management is relatively easy when damage analysis and WIP management are mastered.

It is also important to mention that much of the crises time spent in parts management are a result of the faulty belief that pre-ordering parts is the right thing to do. There is a time when pre-ordering makes sense, and it is usually only after an enhanced appraisal has been performed, eliminating most of the possibility that the parts being ordered are incorrect or incomplete. Trust me, for a majority of your repair jobs, pre-ordering only adds to the chaos!

A great production manager will insist that his team mirror match every replacement part to ensure that it is correct and undamaged. And by “team” I am not referring to the techs who are supposed to be performing the actual repairs.

4. In-process quality assurance.

As vehicle technology continues to advance, leadership needs to take quality control very seriously. A great production manager is involved in QC to ensure every repair job is being repaired according to the OEM’s specifications and not allowing members of the team to pass defects into the next department. This is a big subject in itself, but if you would like to learn more, we have you covered in [this complimentary recording of Operations Monthly LIVE](#).

Successful production managers ensure his or her techs can constantly be touching cars instead of doing admin’s job of chasing down parts, writing supplements, and looking for paperwork. In other words, give the techs what they need to properly repair the car and then get out of their way!

Leadership of a Great Production Manager

As a great production manager, I want you to re-think your job description a little bit. Because, honestly, there are shops where everyone knows their roles and have great visual management systems in place where a “production manager” is, quite frankly, not needed. At least not for managing production in the traditional sense.

As a GREAT production manager, I want you to try to work yourself out of a job by eliminating all the fire-fighting that makes your current responsibilities necessary and give yourself new, more rewarding responsibilities. The responsibility of team building and empowerment; in short, to become a great leader!

Sure, there will still be times that you may need to pick up a phone and check on a part, or run up to the alignment shop to pick up a car, but your real value as a GREAT production manager will be found in your ability to empower your team to make many of the decisions they currently come to you for. If the paint doesn’t match, why do they need to bother you? They know it doesn’t match, so repaint the thing already! All they are doing in these situations is putting their “monkeys” on your back, so it becomes your problem instead of theirs. If you are always doing their jobs for them, why do you need them?

Conclusion

I am very passionate about production management as I spent many years of my career doing it. I was good at it, because I was resilient and understood the technical side of the business and could speak the language of the technicians I served. As important as this continues to be, becoming a really great production manager is more and more dependent on your willingness to stop being a prized crises manager and becoming an amazing crises eliminator! By empowering your team and being a respected coach, you can go from being a good production manager to a great production leader!