

## Kent Elastomer embraces change, success

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KENT, Ohio—Change is rarely an easy process. It takes time and more often than not it's difficult to tell just when a company will see results from its continuous improvements.

But the second Kent Elastomer Products Inc. got a taste of that success in 2006, it never looked back. Its dedication to continuous improvement earned awards for sustainability at each of its locations: Kent; Mogadore, Ohio; and Winesburg, Ohio.

Its facilities in Kent and Winesburg received Encouraging Environmental Excellence Silver Awards from the Ohio EPA in 2014. Kent reduced refuse pickups by 63 percent and Winesburg by 90 percent, the firm said.

Mogadore was honored as a Summit of Sustainability award winner in 2013, given in conjunction with the City of Akron, Summit County, Keep Akron Beautiful, the Greater Akron Chamber and ReWorks. The firm said winners showcase the best examples of sustainability through commercial energy efficiency, waste reduction and employee engagement. Kent Elastomer won in the mid-size division, for companies with 25 to 249 employees.

"The awards are a result of everything we've really worked hard at in the past eight years as far as continuous improvement, lean, leadership training and communication," President Bob Oborn said.

"We've really transformed our culture. It's a culture now to where the employees are making the change. They come up with a problem, and we get a group together, usually all employees. They're usually finding things that we instituted 20 years ago that didn't make sense then and certainly don't make sense now."

Since 2006, Kent Elastomer has held 463 lean events in various stages of lean-type settings, including drive-bys, micro-kaizens or full-blown week-long kaizen events. Employees run each event, but that wasn't always the case. It took some time for management to give up the reins.

"It finally got to the point where we realized we didn't need (management supervision)," said Don Leeper, senior vice president of finance and administration. "The employees come up with the ideas, so we empowered them to come up with the solutions. One of the greatest things I get out of the events is how psyched they are."

Kent Elastomer produces three main product lines: natural latex tubing, dip molding and extrusion with about a 50/50 split between latex and thermoplastic elastomers.

The Kent facility handles all the latex,



A Kent Elastomer employee services one of its latex tubing machines.



RPN photos by Chris Sweeney

The management of Kent Elastomer includes, from left, Cindy Harry, executive director, sales and marketing; President Bob Oborn; Don Leeper, senior vice president, finance and administration; Renee Onesti, director of engineering and maintenance; and John Danes, executive director of operations.

both tubing and dip molding. Mogadore handles all the extrusion and works with TPEs. Its Winesburg facility does no manufacturing; it serves as a processing facility used to remove the mold from the tubing and inspect product.

Kent Elastomers' strongest industry is medical, followed by dental—it makes the rubber bands for braces worldwide. Oborn said the firm has been growing in food and beverage over the last five to 10 years.

### The right people

The company didn't set out to win anything when it began its lean journey in 2006. In fact, it just wanted to get the place clean. Kent Elastomer's former president, Murray Van Epp, stressed cleanliness. Oborn said no matter how hard he tried, his boss always found another mess.

Oborn said a seminar on lean in Lansing, Mich., provided an answer. There he toured three factories and saw results first-hand.

"I went into these factories, and they were spotless. Everything had its place," Oborn said. "My first thought was that this will finally take care of all the things that my boss has always wanted."

For Oborn to bring these lean practices back to Kent, he needed to train the management team. And to do that he needed to find the right guy.

Enter Brian Furlong, who Oborn said works through the University of Akron as a lean instructor, with a 30-year manufacturing background. Oborn said Furlong's passion, and the fact his personality mirrored the culture of Kent Elastomer, sealed the deal.

But Furlong didn't pull any punches. Leeper said once he told him the firm's goal for scrap in latex tubing, Furlong replied, "So you set a goal, to make scrap?"

"He has truly been a mentor for all of us," Oborn said. "Every other year when we're feeling like we're all that, we bring Brian back for a day for a roundtable discussion. It re-energizes the group because he is that kind of guy. He's not looking to paint any pretty picture. If he thinks you need to change here, he'll tell you."

"You have to learn to be able to laugh at yourself. It is infectious when the employees see that the managers are human and make mistakes just like everybody else does. It makes it a better team."

Oborn said two staff additions helped take its lean journey to greater heights. Renee Onesti joined Kent Elastomer in 2007 as manager of engineering and maintenance and was promoted in 2009 to the director level—covering maintenance for all three facilities. The firm

equipped her with a more expanded maintenance staff, increasing from two to five over that span.

"She has done a fantastic job," Oborn said. "You need to have the right people in order to keep your equipment in the running condition that it needs to be in."

Beverly Kiglics joined Kent Elastomer as a quality manager in 2008 and in 2009 was promoted to her current position—director of quality assurance for all three facilities.

Oborn said Kent was competing with another company to hire Kiglics and that one of the tipping points in favor of the firm was Kent's commitment to continuous improvement. When she started with the company, Kiglics lived on the Pennsylvania border, an hour commute.

"Who wouldn't want to work at a company where the top people are committed to lean and continuous improvement? Especially as a quality manager," Kiglics said. "It's fun to work in an environment where everyone wants to improve."

### Buying in

It took time for the work force to buy in, but management never gave up. Even during the transition process.

During the early stages, the firm spent time on the basics: making sure each facility was clean. When Oborn returned to the Mogadore plant the following week, he saw the facility was back to its messy old self. So he shut down production and told the work force he wouldn't start the plant until it was returned to the way it was. Production was stopped for about eight hours, he said.

A month later, Oborn returned to Mogadore to find the mess had returned yet again, so he shut the lines down, gathered employees and told them he'd only be able to do this so many times before he lost his job.

But with management showing that kind of a commitment, it was only a matter of time before everyone bought in too.

"We committed to it fully from Bob on down," said John Danes, executive director of operations. "A lean environment would never work without support from the top because in the beginning stages, it costs time, and it costs money. And you might not be able to see immediate payback."

Oborn said Kent previously would pour a lot of resources into making sure each facility looked nice for a visit, only to see it revert to the original mess days later. Now the firm doesn't spend time cleaning its facilities when its owner comes by, because it's not necessary.

Danes said Kent has run multiple kaizens in an area, and the events are

not limited to production. The firm did one on order entry, accounts receivable and costing systems. Anything that will improve the overall operation is eligible to be put under the microscope.

"We live, eat and breathe Kent Elastomer," Oborn said. "We've got great employees and great people. Our average tenure is 15 years, with virtually zero turnover. It's a great company. It's a family. We have a lot of fun together."

"These jobs that the employees work are hard jobs. It's our job to make those jobs as easy and rewarding as we can. We give our employees a lot of information. They get the exact same notes I send to the owner save for some financial information."

### Always more to learn

The management held its first kaizen event in early 2006, focusing on Winesburg's reel department—tubing that is connected and sold to laboratory supply companies. Kent used to stock 12,000 reels made beforehand in the warehouse. So an employee would have to go out, get the reels, bring them back in and pack them when they were needed. This created travel time with another employee building orders from inventory.

The first kaizen event eliminated the entire reel inventory and changed the process to made-to-order. There is now a feed system where an employee makes the reel at the station.

Oborn said Winesburg reduced travel time for material handlers by 75 percent and made the job for the employee making the reels better by 30 to 40 percent in one week. Naturally, the management team walked out of the event feeling great about the results.

But when Oborn walked by the reel department, he saw an employee crying.

"She said it was her department, and she wasn't even included," Oborn said. "It was our management group, but we didn't include a person from that department in a decision that was changing her life. So we learned from that."

Even when Kent makes improvements, there is always more to learn. Oborn said they are able to take one thing from each event to improve the process for the next kaizen. Every event since the first included two people from the affected area.

Kent also will bring in two people from the other two facilities—four that are not as familiar with the job or in some cases even the facility. Oborn said the fresh perspective not only generates great ideas, but it fosters more inter-facility collaboration.

Beyond the six there is a group facilitator, which can be from the management staff. That person's job is to make sure the group has all the resources it needs to tackle the problem. The problem solving part is in the hands of the employees.

Each event is five days, and the group has \$1,000 to spend as they see fit to improve the problem. Anything more needs approval.

"You can solve a lot of stuff if you put 240 hours toward any problem," Oborn said. "In the beginning, I had to sell. It was good in theory, but there are a lot of expenses."

Kent has not laid off an employee because of lean, and Oborn said that was a promise made to the work force from the beginning.

After each event, the firm conducts a 90-day review, followed by a one-year review. That task is assigned to a specific employee but includes the entire affected department.

"You have to involve people from that department," Danes said. "They are the experts, but they also take ownership of whatever changes are made."