

Bouncing back

How Kent Elastomer earned its employees' trust and saved itself in the process

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Lean manufacturing, the ubiquitous process-efficiency practice, is fairly common. Thousands of companies use it and its results are well-proven. For Kent Elastomer Products Inc., a manufacturer of latex and thermoplastics, the lean principle became a lifeline that, without which, could have meant its end. But before it could implement the practices it was so convinced would save it, it had to get its employees to believe as well.

Kent Elastomer was experiencing lost business on the commodity side, strained margins and declining profitability in the face of annual price increases on raw materials.

"We just knew that the company had to get better at what it was doing. And to get better at it, it was from the top down," says Bob Oborn, the company's president.

So Oborn and president-at-the-time Murray Van Epp, gathered buy in from senior management staff and led the charge to make a change.

After returning from a 2005 seminar that highlighted lean practices, the



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company found itself a manufacturing guru who took a pull-no-punches approach to teaching lean. After a month of training, the company did its first kaizen. These small-group breakout sessions utilize five employees who take one week off from their core duties to map a process, eliminate waste and find a better solution.

Success came in one of the first three kaizens when a group eliminated about 60 percent of the labor to one of its processes, opened up about 400 square feet of floor space and eliminated unnecessary inventory.

"So you want to talk about an ah-ha moment, that was it," Oborn says.

But long before the company experienced success with lean, it sputtered through ideas that didn't fix its problems. Employees weren't convinced that the company was committed to lean and didn't embrace the changes.

"It was something that they had to know that we were serious about," he

says. "So, it was a commitment for us to get better as leaders, and to get better as managers, and to get our employees involved in the process because we needed to reduce scrap, we needed to make ourselves more efficient."

Putting it on the line

After implementing lean processes at the company's Mogadore plant, Oborn came back three weeks later to check on the progress. He found the employees weren't sustaining it. So Oborn shut the entire plant down.

"I shut all the machines down and I said, 'Stop. We're going to stop making stuff, and we're going to get this place back in shape, and we're going to sustain it. And if I come back in another week ... and it's like that again, I'm going to shut the place down. And we're going to continue to shut it down and get it into shape until either I lose my job or you guys get it,'" Oborn says.

It was then that he says employees saw

that management was serious enough to risk sales for a culture change.

"Getting people to change is difficult," Oborn says. "But getting people to trust is paramount."

Often when a company begins creating greater efficiencies it eliminates positions it discovers to be unnecessary. Employees then worry that better processes mean fewer jobs.

"We told the employees back then that we would not layoff a single person because of the improvements that we made in lean, and we never did."

Instead, the company was able to raise its sales by over a third from 2006 to today, allowing it to add two employees.

as game-changing as in the beginning, but are still helpful.

"We have never had a kaizen that has not resulted in an improvement," Oborn says.

The company continues to adapt its lean approach, adopting an exercise in which a person stands in a conspicuous circle (in this case, on a flamboyant rug) in one place for 30 minutes and looks for opportunities for improvement, then spends the next 30 minutes fixing one of those problems.

"You would think that the improvements, or the things that they find, are the real benefits of this, but it's not. It's getting your employees to

That outside attention also led to the company applying for and winning a Summit of Sustainability Award in 2013 in recognition of its energy efficiency and sustainability.

The company found a way to divert its scrap latex from the landfill, reduce its water and sewer usage, and reduce energy consumption.

"It was all continuous improvement, but in the end we really did some great things for the company and the environment as far as energy and resource utilization," Oborn says.

But the statistic Oborn seems most proud of is that the company has had nearly zero turnover in recent years. Ten



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A matter of trust

Getting buy-in took time, but, according to Oborn, the lean process sells itself. Each time a kaizen is assembled, the end result, regardless of the idea produced, is employee ownership. The employees become a part of the change and a great advocate for its implementation. Kaizen groups work without a supervisor, showing employees that they're trusted and empowered to make a change.

Since 2006, Kent Elastomer has had 387 kaizen events. Today, the fixes aren't

observe and see areas of improvement," Oborn says.

Kent Elastomer also holds micro-kaizens, which involve fewer people, take less time and solve smaller problems quickly.

Student becomes the teacher

The results of the company's lean practices have attracted outside attention. A University of Akron evening business class sometimes tours Kent Elastomer's facility to see examples of lean in action.

years ago, he says Kent Elastomer was in a constant state of hiring.

"These are hard jobs," Oborn says. "There's a lot of physical labor in it, and any time that you could make an employee's job a little bit easier so they have a little bit more energy when they go home to their family, that's what this is all about."

"If you can make your employees happy and engaged and empowered, I can just sit back and watch great things happen." ●

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