



Our Lean Years are Our Best Years

How Lean Benefits Our Employees, Our Customers and Led KEP to Industry Leadership

By Bob Oborn

Bob Oborn was named President of Kent Elastomer Products in 2011. His career at KEP is a prime example of the company's philosophy of developing employees from within. He joined KEP as a general laborer in 1981 and took on more and more management responsibilities which included being promoted to VP of Manufacturing in 2000. In 2006, he was named Sr. Vice President, where he oversaw the development and implementation of Lean manufacturing that has transformed the culture at KEP. Bob brings passion, dedication, and a wealth of knowledge to his role. Bob holds a Bachelor of Arts in Business Management and a Masters in Business Administration.

I'm not sure where KEP would be today if we hadn't adopted Lean Manufacturing practices, eliminating waste and practicing continuous improvement.

I say this because I have witnessed suppliers who, for many reasons, were unwilling or unable to adopt processes that made them more efficient. They lost business. Laid off lots of people. Even went out of business.

However because KEP adopted Lean process and culture - and stuck with it (that's the key!) - we have a totally different way of doing business, externally and internally. In the past twelve years, our employees' morale is higher, turnover is lower, and we have three facilities that are pristine showcases and sell confidence to our customers. Best of all, we have the means to keep prices competitive and consistent without killing our margin. Our customers know the value that KEP brings, so even when our prices go up, they can trust that we have done the work to keep waste out of their cost.

How did we get Lean?

In 2006, I was VP of Operations and already in my 25th year at Kent Elastomer Products, providing high-quality elastomer tubing and dip-molded products to medical, food and beverage, and other industries.

At that time, our president was Murray Van Epp, who was also my mentor. To say that Murray placed a high value on organization is an understatement. He was a neat freak! And back then, KEP was always a mess. If the owner would visit, we'd take two days to clean up for their 30-minute walk through. Five days later, it would be messy again.



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Why? We were just reacting, not changing our culture in any proactive way.

One day while reading *Rubber and Plastics News*, I saw an ad for a Lean seminar in Grand Rapids, Michigan – just a half day’s drive from KEP’s Ohio facilities.

I’d been interested in Lean. I knew that the term was popularized by the best-selling 1991 book, *The Machines that Changed the World*, by James P. Womack, Daniel Jones, and Daniel Roos. They described how Lean contributed to Toyota’s success. I wanted to see what Lean could do for KEP.

I’d done enough of these panic clean ups to believe that maybe this Lean movement could help us.

Murray gave me the go-ahead to attend the conference. The experience exceeded my expectations and made me even more enthusiastic about the concept of Lean.

I wanted to learn the technique that I hoped would give my company the ability to continue its long success story.

KEP was founded in 1960. We survived all these decades – not by sticking to what we already knew – but by building on our expertise. For instance, in 1986, we expanded from American-made rubber latex tubing to high-quality thermoplastic and pvc tubing, dip-molded products and non-latex tourniquets, even creating proprietary products custom-made for clients.

We are proud of our longevity, but that’s never a guarantee that we will continue to win projects. We compete in a world of suppliers who make appealing promises, so there is always a need for KEP to continually improve to stay competitive.

In 2006, I believed that Lean would help.

It turns out, Lean didn’t just help. It entirely *transformed* KEP.

Lean – More Than a Checklist

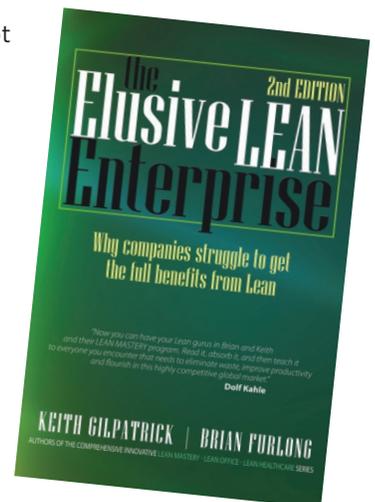
Lean is so much more than just being organized. It’s a methodology that compels everyone in the organizational chart to seek out ways to eliminate waste – all kinds of waste! Wasted supplies and resources. Wasted energy. Wasted time. Especially wasted talent. For it to work, Lean requires everyone’s buy-in, not just management. And it absolutely must start from the top.

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Over the years, I have learned that some companies would approach the concept of Lean by assigning a mid-level manager and saying, “You’re in charge of Lean.” But without a president and CEO with passionate support for Lean, the change in the workplace culture will typically not take root and fizzle out.

In KEP’s journey, our next step was to find a Lean program. I studied the Lean programs being offered at four local colleges and found one that would work best for us at the University of Akron.

What sold me on Akron was Brian Furlong, who led the program. He was an operations expert with a long history in business. He’s the co-author of the best book I’ve ever read on the subject – *The Elusive Lean Enterprise*. If you work with KEP or just know me professionally, chances are I’ve given you a copy of this book in the hopes that it inspires you as much as it does me.





My New Mentor – Brian Furlong

Brian's a straight-talker who made us earn his mentorship. Right out of the gate, he asked, "Why should I bother to teach you how to become Lean?" He insists on commitment and we assured him that we wanted to learn.

Brian demanded that we begin by committing to give him six days and lots of manpower. That's the first test. Are you willing to invest time and money? It's going to cost you before you see the savings. You have to invest people's time. In our case, I took thirty people away from the office for six days. Three days – then a month off – then back for three more days. Executives, directors, managers, supervisors and shift leaders.

Your first reaction might be – we can't afford to have all these people away from the workplace for this long. We set egos aside to realize – yes, our company can exist without us for six days – and then committed ourselves to the training that would help us eliminate waste from our processes.

Our First Project

After our initial three-day training, we returned to our Winesburg, Ohio facility to apply what we learned about Lean to the way we assembled a 50-foot tubing reel. The process in place required workers to walk two miles a day to coil the tubing. Our Lean solution: Redesign the set-up where workers did this task at a table – reducing labor by 25%.

It saved time. Eliminated unnecessary movement. But it was a failure in Lean best practices.

Why? We didn't involve any of the workers who actually did that job. We managers created this solution. When we presented the new process to the assemblers, they were upset. They assumed that our new efficiencies would lead to cutbacks. Plus, we were toying with their jobs. We didn't even ask for their input. I totally understood how they felt. What if someone came into my office and changed the way I did things?

Lesson learned. To this day, we always include the workers whose jobs our Lean efficiencies will affect because who better than they know the nuances of those tasks? Plus, I promised that we would never use Lean-inspired workplace efficiencies to lay off workers. This frees them up to be enthusiastic about Lean.

We returned for three more days of Lean Training with Brian Furlong, improving upon what we learned, setting the stage for our next big projects.

Our Signature Task That Changed Our Company

Soon, we applied Lean practices to our Maintenance Department, the most cluttered area of our corporate headquarters and dip-molding facility in Kent, Ohio.

We threw out three truckloads of stuff. Motors we didn't have machines for anymore. A \$20,000 reel of CAT3 wiring that we had no use for. Old stuff. Even brand new stuff. If it did not provide value – it was gone. At first, our maintenance people pleaded to keep everything, but we reassured them if we needed it, we would buy it. They relented.

We turned KEP's maintenance area from a pile of clutter to a showcase of organization. There was no more guessing where items belonged. There was no doubt – Lean was a game changer!



..... *Our Lean Years are Our Best Years*

It turned doubters into believers. Our hourly workers marveled at the before-and-after. (ALWAYS take pictures before and after. The results are astonishing.) This event turned our maintenance area from cluttered to clean, out of control to orderly.

To keep up the momentum, we applied Lean cleanup practices at our nearby Mogadore, Ohio facility where we manufacture extruded tubing and profiles.

Our Lean-certified managers trained their teams, putting into practice 5S methodology. This is a system for organizing spaces so work can be performed efficiently and effectively. The five S words are Sort, Set in Order, Shine, Standardize and Sustain. At KEP, we added a sixth - Safety - creating our own 6S methods.

For a week, our enthusiastic team followed the process: Sort (declutter), Set in Order (organize), Shine (clean up), Standardize (assign ongoing tasks and schedules) and plan to Sustain (keep this up and not backslide). We did all of this with safety in mind.

SORT | SET IN ORDER | SHINE | STANDARDIZE | SUSTAIN | SAFETY

That facility gleamed. I was proud at how Lean caught on. I went back a month later and it was all back to being a mess. We did not Sustain.

That's when I remembered Brian Furlong's warning to us: Either you are 100% committed to Lean - or you're wasting your time.

I did something that grabbed everyone's attention - I shut down all six extrusion lines. Now, if you know anything about KEP - we are all about production. That's why we've been in business since 1960. I announced, "We're not going to make another inch of tubing till this place is cleaned up!"

I did something that grabbed everyone's attention - I shut down all six extrusion lines.

For one and a half long, painful days of ZERO production, we got the extrusion plant back to the way it was a month before.

I wish that was the happy ending. But just to show you that the commitment is ongoing, I had to shut the place down again a second time just two months later. But that lesson stuck. That second shut down not only sold Lean to our employees, it demonstrated that KEP management committed to becoming Lean.

From that point, we were all in across the entire company. Two years after I attended that first Lean event - we had trained every employee at KEP's three facilities.

Next in this 3-part series, you will learn about how KEP's continuous improvement activities solved customer problems, led our employees out of our silos, helped some employees get promotions, and resulted in nearly 1,000 process improvements - all documented and available for review!

