



..... Part 3 of a 3-part series by Bob Oborn

Lean Benefits: Success in Community, Industry and Your Future

Part three
of a three-part
series on
the business
benefits
of Lean.

By Bob Oborn

In parts one and two of this series, I discussed how Kent Elastomer Products (KEP) adopted Lean methodologies. Our adoption of Lean didn't come easy. There were missteps. But I was committed – and if the commitment doesn't start at the top and include everyone – Lean won't happen.

Persistence paid off. KEP became more efficient. We greatly reduced waste. Just as importantly, we changed our culture. Our employees now know they are not just encouraged, but *expected* to seize opportunities to improve KEP. This empowers our workers and gives them ownership in their jobs and ability to grow their careers.

Lean benefits us in these three important ways.

1-Becoming Lean Improves Our Position in the Community

KEP is involved in many community causes. One of them is our outreach to students at the nearby University of Akron who study business. We have a great connection with the school where we first learned about Lean under the mentorship of Brian Furlong, whose tough standards and positive encouragement inspired our success.

Each semester since 2011, we have welcomed students from the University of Akron's Bachelor of Organizational Supervision class. The tour provides a first-hand look at KEP's ongoing Lean journey. This teaches the next generation of manufacturing and research professionals about Lean from the start of their careers.

I also tell KEP's story by giving presentations at events hosted by universities and regional business organizations. I share how we cleaned up, got organized and created new efficiencies – saving time and money. Before and after photos illustrate our clean-up projects. Data tells the story of time and money saved for clients. My audiences hear the unvarnished truth. We worked too much overtime. Experienced high turnover. Created too much scrap and rework. Worst of all, we overlooked talent, didn't make it easy for workers to grow and take ownership of their projects.

After every presentation, someone asks me, "How do I adopt Lean for my company?" My answer is simple. "It starts at the top. If the leader isn't committed, it won't happen. Everyone has to be all in – or forget it, you're wasting your time."



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

I warn my audience: If you don't follow through, you'll lose credibility. If you stick to it, you'll change the trajectory of your company and the careers of the teams you manage.

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2-Becoming Lean Improves Our Position in Industry

Our transformation is noticeable. Customers – many who consider rubber and tubing factories as dark and dirty – compliment us. We have three facilities. I have heard each one described as the “cleanest factory” they have ever seen.

By clean, I mean all the time. Back in 2006, we were always scrambling to clean up before executive and customer visits.

In our Lean training, we not only learned methodology, our management team saw firsthand how Lean worked for other organizations. I was inspired by tours of spotless, organized factories, and by workers who were taught the mission to cut waste and optimize efficiency. I wanted that for KEP and I wasn't turning back to the old inefficient, time- and money-wasting ways.

Today, we don't have to scramble for guests. We welcome pop-in visitors because the Lean culture is so ingrained we are always organized and efficient and looking for new ways to improve. I don't have to tell people to clean up. It's done. It's a good habit. It's just part of the everyday job.

The impressive cleanliness and organization aren't just cosmetic. Our clients enjoy the fruits of our efficiencies in the form of innovative problem solving – which is key to putting our Lean training into practice. We have conducted nearly a thousand Lean events that resulted in improved processes.

For example: KEP employees participated in a series of Kaizens. We looked hard at our extrusion making process. The result? Our team learned how to reduce machine change over time from 4.5 hours to 1 hour. We also organized production to make all the same type of orders in one run. The result? KEP now produces the same extrusion volume in half the machines in the same amount of time.

By continually improving, with an entire team of workers, managers and executives all embracing the Lean mission, there is no end to the number of improvements that result in cost-savings. These challenges bring out the best in our workers and build customer loyalty by delivering the results they need.

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3-Becoming Lean Positions Us for Stability in Changing Economic Times

Our Lean culture not only brings out the best in our talented workforce. It's like a shock absorber as KEP navigates through the wild ride of global economic conditions.

Think about three major elements of our business - the three-legged stool propped up by Price, Quality and Service. Our dedication to Lean allows us to create high-quality products and provide excellent service. Price, on the other hand, is controlled by factors bigger than just KEP.

KEP can leverage our innovation and efficiency to control price so that we are the best at Quality and Service and be very competitive at the third leg of the stool - Price. When costs fluctuate, KEP can better manage it and eliminate or greatly reduce price markups - this retains and reassures customers. Staying solid on pricing set us apart from competitors.

Conclusion

These benefits are the result of empowering workers.

My job is to give people the tools they need to be successful for whatever they do for however long they are here. Lean is my best tool to keep growing. If you're not growing, you're dying. When I speak to leadership groups, I make it clear that Lean starts from the top, includes every person in the organization and never ends. That continuous improvement is what makes every day exciting at KEP - and I've been coming to work here since 1981!

The changes in your company's culture are bigger than any one person. But the one who establishes Lean processes can be proud of the legacy that gives so many people opportunities to succeed.