

A Partner's View of KEP's Leadership Journey

A three-part series

An honest, up close look at our partnership with Kent Elastomer Products, an American manufacturer committed to transparency and growth.

By Darla Klein

Principal and Owner
of **LeaderSHIFT**



Part 1

Improvement
Requires a
Shift in Thinking –
and It Has to
Begin at the Top

Preface

by Bob Oborn
President, Kent Elastomer Products

This three-part white paper series by Darla Klein is a first-hand look at how one Ohio manufacturer reversed deeply rooted habits of inefficiency to become passionate about continuous improvement. This resulted in increased efficiency, reduced waste, stronger finances and increased capabilities.

That company is Kent Elastomer Products. I started working on the factory floor there in 1981. Today, in 2020, I am that company's president. Along the way, I have worked in many different jobs at every rung of the ladder. I can tell you a lot of stories about KEP - but none like this.

Darla talks about KEP from her unique, external perspective as our partner.

Anyone interested in working with - and even for - Kent Elastomer Products, will benefit from Darla's insights into our company. She tells the truth from her front row seat. She knows what we were - what we became - and our failures and successes along the way.

I met Darla Klein in 2010, two years after we implemented the Lean program into our processes. For Lean to work, it requires discipline, dedication and follow through. We realized that we owed our supervisors extra training. This would help them develop the tools to plan, measure and build upon a long-term culture of continuous improvement that would not fade away like just another fad.

We chose the communication and leadership training program led by Darla Klein. Ten years later, we still work with Darla, who is president of **LeaderSHIFT**, her training, coaching and consulting firm.

In this series, Darla shares her front row view of how KEP evolved into an organization that is built on trust and accountability.

She even discusses our mistakes and growing pains. But that's okay. We value honesty and transparency - and that's why Darla's guidance makes sense for us. That's why we value her partnership.

Kent Elastomer Product's Leadership Journey

Spend any time at all with Kent Elastomer Products (KEP) and you quickly realize how passionate they are about continuous improvement and how they've used Lean to increase efficiency, reduce waste and maximize the company's potential. What you may not realize, however, is how Lean led KEP into its leadership journey and the path that journey has taken over the years. My name is Darla Klein, Principal and Owner of **LeaderSHIFT, Inc.** and I've had the privilege of traveling alongside KEP on that path. It's my honor to have been on the journey with them and to capture my perspective here.

What's the Lean connection?

Lean thinking is the embodiment of Toyota's production system. When US automakers realized just how successful Toyota had become, they scrambled to figure out what Toyota was doing differently...leading to many tours of Toyota manufacturing sites and deep dives into the tools being used. US automakers began copying the observable tools of Lean thinking.

A reasonable question at this point might be: why would Toyota expose its secrets to competitors? Why wouldn't they protect this information at all costs in order to continue their market domination?

The answer is that Toyota's real secret to success was in the way its employees thought and acted. Thinking is not visible and acting is difficult to see in a short time - during a shop floor tour, for example.

Any US manufacturer who adopted the observable tools of Lean probably made some initial progress but the truth is most fell far short of re-creating Toyota's system - or its success. KEP's President, Bob Oborn, gives some brilliant examples of this in Part 1 of his Lean white paper when he describes the early Lean projects and results at KEP. Their first project was a failure because management didn't include the people who actually did the work. And, after implementing Lean in their extrusion plant, Bob had to shut down production more than once for the improvements to last.

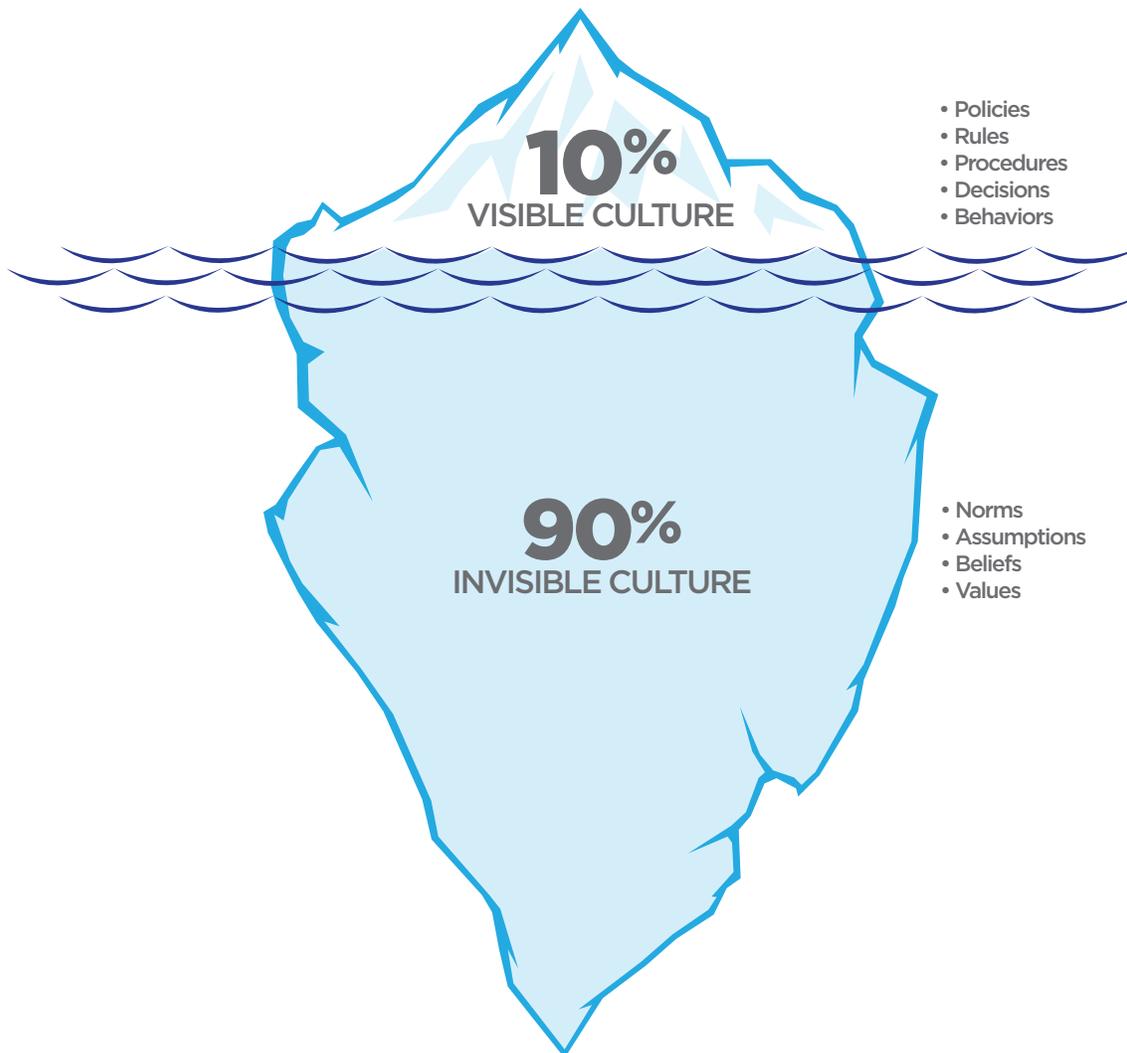
The lesson here is that you can reproduce "technical skills" but not "behavioral skills" that change what employees freely want to do. Unless employees change their way of thinking and their behaviors, operations usually return to the way they were, also known as, "we've done it this way for 20 years."

Here's the kicker: that kind of *SHIFT* in thinking has to start at the top. The leadership team is made up of employees after all and if the thinking doesn't begin there, if that team isn't 100% committed, you're wasting time, energy and effort. Just ask Bob.

What we are highlighting here is the importance of culture. There are many definitions of culture, from the anthropological perspective of the customs, arts, social institutions, and achievements of a particular nation, people, or other social group to the business perspective of a way of thinking, behaving or working that exists in a place or organization. In my work across many different types of organizations, the best working definition I've found is that culture is "the way we do things around here."

Culture: The Way We Do Things Around Here

Let's examine this concept, using the familiar iceberg model:



The way we do things around here is visible: policies, rules, procedures and systems, decisions and behaviors. You will notice this is only the "tip of the iceberg" – a small percentage of the total culture.

That's because the way we do things around here is also invisible: group norms, assumptions, beliefs and values. And this is the large chunk of the iceberg (the culture) that lies below the waterline.

Let's make sure we understand the parts that make up this invisible culture:

Norms are group expectations for behaviors; that is, uniformity of attitude, opinion, feeling or action shared by people. Individuals are significantly influenced by the norms of behavior. People rarely go against the norms because punishment for breaking norms is exclusion from the group, while the reward for adhering to the norms is acceptance and affiliation.

Assumptions are harder to change than norms. Normative behavior develops because people make assumptions about how things should operate. Assumptions, in turn, are based on their beliefs about the way the work should be done. Assumptions are statements accepted as truth, without proof or demonstration, although people most often think their assumptions are based on facts.

Beliefs: The reason it's difficult to change assumptions is because an individual's assumptions are linked to his or her beliefs. For example, an employee at KEP in the early days of Lean could have assumed that it was OK not to adhere to the 6-S process (SORT | SET IN ORDER | SHINE | STANDARDIZE | SUSTAIN | SAFETY) when the pressure to produce increased. In this case, the belief was likely that "it's most important to keep production going, we'll clean up later." A belief is something a person accepts to be true.

Values: Underlying all of this is what people value. Continuing our Lean example, getting the tubing out the door was most important. Why? Because generating revenue was highly valued, even at the risk of Lean improvements that could increase efficiency and ultimately generate a better net income.

It's easier now to see why, after a big launch of the 6-S process and a massive clean-up in the extrusion plant, when Bob went back a short time later, things were a mess again. Deciding to implement Lean, creating the 6-S process, conducting a big clean-up event - those were all tip of the culture iceberg actions.

The way we've always done it, assuming production was more important (and being reinforced/rewarded for that), believing and valuing customer satisfaction and profit were all below the waterline - the 90% that truly influenced the way KEP employees thought and behaved.

The importance of leadership was now very real to Bob. He knew - and had demonstrated with two plant shutdowns - he had to be 100% committed or he was just wasting resources. He was beginning to see the importance of culture and beginning to recognize it would take new behaviors to effectively influence employees to change what they freely wanted to do.

"Lean requires leadership, not management."

- Brian Furlong

The First Step: Fix My Supervisors

Like any good company president, with awareness comes action. If KEP needed to change how they influenced employees' thoughts and behaviors, then of course the supervisors needed training. (Wait for it...this is something Bob and I come back to all the time!)

Bob reached out to the University of Akron because of his relationship with them through Lean. He discovered **Leadership Essentials**, a workforce training solution designed to instill basic skills necessary to effectively manage and lead others. He signed up three supervisors for the course in 2008 and continued to enroll his supervisors each semester throughout 2008-2009.

As the KEP supervisors went through the training, individuals would say they were internalizing the concepts and planned to make changes in how they behaved back on the job at KEP. There were also comments like "you don't know what it's like back at work!" and – my personal favorite – "this is good stuff, why hasn't my boss taken this class?"

The supervisors were frustrated by the invisible culture getting in their way – just like Lean, they were running into the truth that this leadership work starts at the top.

Next Steps: The Beginning of an Odyssey

To their credit, when presented with this feedback from their supervisors, Bob and Murray Van Epp, KEP's President before Bob, were willing to explore the idea of a Leadership Essentials class tailored for the senior management team. (Hmmm... perhaps the supervisors didn't need to be fixed after all!)

In March, 2010, we began that journey with the senior management team. The first course included seven sessions and covered shaping culture, navigating change, building relationships, resolving conflict, creating teamwork, managing employee performance, delegating effectively, negotiating well and managing time.

One of my mantras at **LeaderSHIFT** is that training can't be an event, instead, it needs to be a process. In other words, an event means the learners show up, sit down, maybe even participate and learn something new – but then go back to work and do things the way they've always been done. A process means we build learning into the way we do things around here, that is, it becomes part of the culture.

That said, I'm not certain any of us envisioned the 10-year journey we've been on.

Culture...the way we do things around here. KEP is dedicated to investing in and growing their employees. An example of this in action: all three of the first graduates of Leadership Essentials remain at KEP and have grown into new roles:

- **Greg Graham is now the Director, Extrusion Operations**
- **April Butcher is now the Manager, Extrusion Manufacturing.**
- **Mark Agee is the Manager, Custom Dip.**

After the first series of classes, KEP embraced their leadership development. True to form, it became about continuous improvement, both at an organizational level and for each senior management team member personally. Since 2010 we've gathered for sessions to:

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- **Analyze employee survey feedback**
 - **Define roles**
 - **Explore motivation**
 - **Improve accountability**
 - **Create alignment**
 - **Investigate giving and receiving feedback**
 - **Enhance collaboration and break down silos between locations**
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KEP's leadership journey has grown organically. At each session we created action items for the senior management team to implement and then decided where to go next based on the results of those actions. This organic approach has worked well for KEP, keeping the momentum going while also allowing for the natural ebb and flow of the business.

Lessons Learned on the Journey

Take any journey across the United States and you will see historical markers along many of the nation's highways and country roads. These markers commemorate an event or person, building or location officially recognized as worthy for its historic value.

Since KEP has been on a leadership journey, I thought it would be valuable to identify leadership markers – those ideas or concepts recognized as worthy for the leadership growth and value they brought KEP. Just like culture, there are many definitions of leadership. In order to select the most appropriate markers to highlight the KEP journey, I'm defining leadership as a process, not a position. It is the use of key skills and practices, correctly applied at the right time, to help people and organizations reach their highest potential.

My job, indeed my value, is to meet people and organizations where they are, help them decide where they want and need to go and how best to get there. Because this is KEP's journey, the markers are presented in the order in which they appeared for KEP and not in the order of importance anyone else might assign.

Leadership Marker #1: Strong Cultures Share a Common Language

A common language is the foundation for communication and collaboration. One of the first steps of KEP's leadership journey was to begin creating that vocabulary. Although the senior management team at KEP has a history of being stable, with low turnover and a solid track record of promoting from within, when we began this journey there was a distinct separation between functions and between the three different production sites (Kent, Mogadore and Winesburg).

Even though this may seem contradictory, we began to bridge those gaps by increasing each person's self-awareness. We started with behavioral preferences, using different self-assessment tools and drawing on Neurolinguistic Programming (NLP) language to give voice to the differences. Once the senior management team members became comfortable "in their own skins" (for example, were they Quick or Careful?; more Task-focused or Relationship-focused?) it became easier for them to see the preferences of other people. With that awareness, they could recognize different behaviors they could use to better connect, solve problems and handle conflict. By paying attention to how they "landed on others," team members could directly improve communication and collaboration.

The payoff? When the senior management team learned how to use this common language to embrace their differences and to **value what those differences could offer**, some of the gaps began to close.

Different is not wrong, different is simply different, and when a team truly values those differences, extraordinary results can be achieved.

We continued to bridge differences by exploring perspectives and the value of listening. Looking back, two concepts were "stickier" than others for the KEP team:

1. The Gears© - Understanding Different Perspectives
2. BEPPUMOIDs - Understanding Listening Barriers

I will conclude Part One by examining the first concept - understanding different perspectives.

1. The Gears© - Understanding Different Perspectives

The Gears© is a metaphor for perspective and there are always at least three possibilities. These gears are the points of view from which you can consider what is being said or presented:

1st Gear: Representing your own perspective, your own experience and opinions (subjective - I, me, mine)

2nd Gear: Considering the other person's perspective, their opinion and experience (you, yours)

3rd Gear: Considering the perspective of an observer, seeing the situation without emotion (objective - ours, all of us)

There is no one “right” gear for all situations, the key is flexibility. The ability to move flexibly among all three gears provides the most resourcefulness for people and, ultimately, for their organizations.

This concept gave KEP team members a way to challenge each other to shift perspectives when they may have become “stuck.” By simply asking, “What gear are we in and what gear do we need to be in?” – using the shared common language – they could help each other listen better, consider other points of view and explore different ideas or ways of thinking.

In addition to addressing the Gears©, the team examined what barriers get in the way of active listening – and worked toward eliminating those barriers to become better listeners. I will examine that and other exercises in Part Two.

END OF PART ONE.

My belief in the importance of flexibility is so strong it is embedded into the name I chose for my company: LeaderSHIFT. After many years of working in corporate America, my observation was that people got themselves in trouble whenever they got stuck – stuck by thinking they were right, that only they knew the answer...discounting the ideas and opinions of others. The ability to be flexible – to SHIFT – is what allows people and organizations to thrive.

Postscript

by Bob Oborn
President, Kent Elastomer Products

Now you see how Darla led KEP leadership to our first Leadership Marker – developing a common language. In Part II of this series, Darla reveals how our team tackled more Leadership Markers – building trust and embracing accountability.