

Donnelly Tools to Boost Efficiency



Setup carts are designed to be versatile and mobile.

It's not news that the bottom line drives businesses. What may be news is how effectively that bottom line may be improved with the rightset of tools. Donnelly Custom Manufacturing, an injection molding and assembly company based in Alexandria, practices lean manufacturing, which is both a philosophy and set of tools designed to help businesses boost efficiency.

West Central Initiative has provided assistance to help Donnelly improve quality, including granting funds for training. Donnelly, which makes parts for a wide range of short-run industrial applications, implemented lean manufacturing in 2001. The company turned to it, says President Ron Kirscht, after gradually growing dissatisfied with an ad hoc approach to prioritizing and managing.

LEAN MEANS SUCCESS FOR SHORT-RUN OPERATION

Lean manufacturing, along with other business tools such as total quality management and demand flow manufacturing, addresses the inherent conflict between the demands on business to increase service quality and timeliness while reducing lead times and costs, says

Kirscht. "The human instinct is to say 'I'm trapped!' The lean concept provides a method to structure improvements and involves people while you're doing it."

And Donnelly employees definitely are involved. "The employees aren't just involved - they run the process," says Dave Lamb, Director of Manufacturing. Since the initial training, employees have undertaken several "continuous improvement events," which are focused sessions, typically a few days, designated to improve performance in specific areas. The drive to improve has touched most components of Donnelly's process, from labels to part counts to inventory access and contamination.

EMPLOYEES ARE KEY TO CHANGE

The continuous improvement process at Donnelly typically involves teams of six or seven employees. Some members of the team work in the area under examination and some do not. First, members document current practices and identify issues and overall performance. Then, the team members brainstorm possible improvements, keeping an eye out for roadblocks or opportunities to consolidate steps of a particular process. The group then tries out

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– Ron Kirscht



Training sessions held on the shop floor.

improvement ideas. "At the end of the week, there are actually concrete results," says Lamb.

Finally, group members incorporate the tested improvements into a process, which is presented and taught to other employees. In one instance, a team reduced the distance a part traveled through the plant by 50 percent. And, since Donnelly specializes in short-run manufacturing, which has a high complexity index, that kind of savings quickly has an impact.

HOW SHORT-RUN IS DONE

Founded in 1984, Donnelly has grown from eight employees to over 200 permanent employees. Its founding principles - setting new standards for short-run manufacturing and establishing enduring relationships with customers - have remained firm. The company's tagline is "How Short-Run is Done," which translates into, among other things, sustaining a passion for delivering good products on time.

While the bottom-line results are exciting, equally exciting is "the enthusiasm of the folks who are involved in it; they really get

involved and start digging into problems," says Lamb.

"It's exciting because it works - because we know we have to get better," Kirscht adds. "This is a tool that allows you to do that. The other thing is that it's a practical and useful way to tap into the creativity and the intellect of people in the organization. Everybody who works at an organization has something that is unique and powerful and special if you give them the opportunity to share it. This provides them the opportunity to share it."

FUNDING AND FINDING WAYS

He says that WCI, along with Minnesota Technology, has helped Donnelly with funding and finding ways to improve. WCI's contacts and experience with companies that have implemented similar concepts have been especially valuable, he says. Another important organization for Donnelly is Alexandria Technical College, which offers training that is well suited to the company's needs. The three organizations, he says, "create a triangle for us to use as a model to create borders around our pursuit of continuous

improvement and that never-ending search for excellence."

Kirscht praises the resources that the groups offer, along with their proactive approach. He compares it to rock climbing: "You have to have something internal that drives you in a direction you have passion for; you can use these resources, these funds, this technology to drive yourself



Employees setting up an injection molding machine.

forward. The climbing and lifting is still up to us, but it's great to have these resources as the ropes and the anchors to lift ourselves upward."

He offers a friendly word of advice to anyone unfamiliar with WCI. He says that people should inform themselves about its various programs and initiatives, because they are likely to need the information or resources at some point. Being aware of what's available is important because when that critical time comes, "it's good to have spent the time to hear what they have to say. I know that it has paid huge dividends for us."