

Maintainer Improves Processes and Builds a Lean Culture

Manufacturers must consistently strive to be efficient and eliminate waste—in both time and materials—to be successful. Getting to the root cause of the problems that generate waste and getting everyone from management to floor workers involved are key to that success. But how do you create the company culture to support this effort?

Shelley Morris, general manager at Maintainer Corporation of Iowa, Inc., was searching for answers to that question when he attended a CIRAS event—Lean: Problem-Solving—in November of 2011.

The Sheldon, Iowa, company manufactures customized mechanics service truck bodies, lube truck bodies, and extendable boom cranes. “Like most companies,” Morris says, “we have had challenges finding something that sticks and something that is sustainable and meaningful to the workforce. As a 38-year-old company, we needed a framework and some clear goals to help us create a culture and environment in which we can thrive.”

Following this initial event, Morris met with Bob Coacher, CIRAS account manager, and Jeff Mohr, CIRAS project manager, to discuss how to get the entire company involved.

As a result, CIRAS organized a two-day on-site training session. Tracey Richardson, president/owner of Teaching Lean, Inc., led the sessions that focused on problem-solving processes based on the Toyota Business Practices model.

The 12 workshop participants included Maintainer’s president, Dennis Michels, and Morris. Leadership plays a crucial role in developing an environment where the rest of the employees choose to get involved and stay involved in making improvements, according to Coacher.

The morning session was devoted to learning how to create a Lean culture, with the afternoon session focusing on a structured problem-solving process. Mohr says the most important thing to gain from these sessions is for participants to learn to ask what is happening and what is supposed to be happening. “The gap between those is the problem,” he explains.



Through the training sessions, the team learned an eight-step problem-solving process. The steps are: identify the problem; break it down; develop a goal statement; perform root-cause analysis; brainstorm countermeasures and create an implementation plan; see the plan through; check results and processes; and update standard work and share wherever applicable.

The structured approach facilitates involvement by everyone. “The process makes it easier for the workforce to discuss their ideas and for management to recognize it is the workforce who has the skills and ability to know and see things of which the managers may not be aware,” Coacher explains.

On the second day, the participants divided into three teams to tackle real problems on the plant floor. This hands-on training provided the teams with confidence to address more complex issues.

While it is still too early to fully measure the impact, Morris says the company is on the right track. A process engineer has been hired to work on problem solving, and the company has already used the approach to successfully reduce the amount of hydraulic hose scrap.

Maintainer is also working to ensure it has the skilled labor needed to meet consumer demand. “In northwest Iowa, we can’t always solve our production problems with increasing head count,” Morris points out. “We’re using the problem-solving tools to work toward more efficiency. A part of this is gaining a better understanding of the jobs we’re asking our workforce to do and ensuring they have the training to do the jobs.”

➤ For more information, contact Jeff Mohr at 515-294-8534 or jeffmohr@iastate.edu.