

For Immediate Release
April 20, 2005

For More Information Contact:
Muriel Mosher
207-623-0680

Maine MEP Helps Rockport Company Get Lean

ROCKPORT – Attending a recent Lean 101 workshop presented by personnel from the Maine Manufacturing Extension Partnership really opened the eyes of Kirby Kramer, vice president of finance and operations at CedarWorks Playsets of Rockport.

“While I am usually cynical about bringing in consultants, I was really impressed with the Maine MEP’s Lean Manufacturing concept and felt there were opportunities for improvement in our manufacturing facility,” said Kramer.

“The owners and management at CedarWorks Playsets have a philosophy of always looking for better ways to do things while constantly improving customer service and the quality of our products,” Kramer added. “I got the impression Lean implementation would fit right into our culture.”

As it turns out, Kramer was right. In addition to implementing Lean techniques into the company’s manufacturing facility, MEP’s project manager Jon Kirsch later involved CedarWorks’ sales and customer service personnel in the program.

“We now find ourselves looking critically at all our business activities,” Kramer said, “and applying Lean Manufacturing thinking as we work to implement additional improvements in our operations and in the playsets we sell all over the world.”

“CedarWorks is a perfect example of what often happens when a company becomes involved in the concept of Lean Manufacturing techniques,” said Rod Rodrigue, president of the Maine MEP.

“Company officials usually start out thinking Lean is only viable in manufacturing situations,” Kirsch added, “but they quickly learn Lean is process oriented and can be applied to almost any aspect of a company’s day-to-day business operations.”

Kramer certainly agrees. “I was amazed at how much our people throughout the company got involved in the Lean techniques and how much they got out of it,” he said. “We got assistance from employees who never took part in anything like this before, and they did a great job in moving the process forward.”

CedarWorks was founded in 1981 as a regional manufacturer of swing sets, playsets and cedar fencing. Duncan Brown purchased the company in 1988, and the business quickly became a family affair as his wife, Susan, assisted in the marketing and general management of the business. The couple's son, Barrett, joined CedarWorks in 1997 and was named president in 2000. He has continued their commitment to superior customer service and building the strongest and safest playsets on the market.

CedarWorks' product line has grown from two basic climbing structures to three play-system product lines with 15 structures and numerous accessories. Sales have also expanded greatly and CedarWorks now sells swing sets and furniture to families in all 50 states and 20 foreign countries.

An ISO-certified company, CedarWorks has embraced the Lean concepts and has implemented several changes since MEP project managers worked with the company during the past two years.

"I can't say enough about the people at the Maine MEP," said Kramer. "They were excellent at facilitating our group. They never lectured us. Instead, they allowed the group to solve problems on their own. The project managers were never condescending, they never denigrated anyone for making a suggestion and they worked to draw out collective solutions."

Some of the solutions were simple, some complex. However, all translated into savings of time and money. For example, one Lean exercise revealed a supplier was delivering cedar that resulted in 50 percent waste, and it was discovered the workflow in the grading area resulted in excess material and employee travel.

Working with MEP's project managers, the issue concerning the supply of bad wood was resolved. This increased the first-pass yield of the wood grading process by about 20 percent. Improvement in the grading area reduced personnel travel distance from 20,562 feet to 6,256 feet per day - a 70 percent decrease, which is equal to a reduction of 2.7 miles per day. "That translates to 45 minutes a day in savings," Kramer pointed out. "We also increased our usable space in that area by 580 square feet by removing materials and equipment that were not being used."

Finally, a Value Stream Mapping of the sales and customer service processes revealed potential savings of one person year.

“Lean has certainly helped our operation,” Kramer said, “but in the heat of battle it’s easy to slip back into the old ways. I intend to use MEP personnel for remedial sessions to ensure that we are doing what we said we would and to make sure the Lean program continues to be productive.”

The Maine MEP is an affiliate of the NIST under the U.S. Department of Commerce. The national MEP is a network of manufacturing extension centers that provide business and technical assistance to smaller manufacturers in all 50 states, the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico. Through MEP, manufacturers have access to more than 2000 manufacturing and business “coaches” whose job is to help firms make changes that lead to greater productivity, increased profits, and enhanced global competitiveness. For more information on the Maine MEP program call 1-800-637-4634.