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Maine MEP Helps Auburn Concrete Company Get Lean

AUBURN – When officials at Oldcastle Precast’s Northeast Group decided to learn more about Lean Manufacturing techniques they selected a subsidiary - Superior Concrete Co. of Auburn – as the lead facility.

“No one was more cynical about this entire procedure than me,” said Peter Allen, then a production supervisor for Superior Concrete. “I couldn’t figure out what everyone was talking about, but once we worked with project manager Wayne Messer at the Maine Manufacturing Extension Partnership it was apparent we needed to make some changes in the way we do things to make it in this business world.”

Allen is so convinced that Lean Manufacturing techniques are important to his company he has assumed the duties of Lean Facilitator at Superior Concrete.

“I really enjoyed working with the people at Maine MEP,” Allen said, “and appreciate what they have to offer companies in Maine. The MEP project managers know what they are doing and are great teachers.

“While much of the Lean technique is common sense,” Allen added, “I realize it would take me years to learn what the project managers already know.”

“We always enjoy hearing good things about our project managers,” said Rod Rodrigue, president of the Maine MEP. “The more companies learn about Lean Manufacturing techniques, the better off they are in dealing with internal and external situations.

“The people at Superior Concrete deserve a lot of credit for being open minded about the process and willing to learn and reshape the way they do things. Obviously, we not only assisted the Auburn facility, but much of what was learned there has been passed on to other facilities within the company.”

Superior Concrete Co. has been located in Auburn since 1946. A manufacturer of precast concrete products such as manholes, septic tanks and pumping stations, the company currently employs about 60 people. Oldcastle Precast, a division of CRH, which is headquartered in Dublin, Ireland, purchased the Auburn facility six years ago.

According to Allen, CRH has a strong history of investing in their employees to improve the way in which they do business. Incorporating Lean techniques is the company's latest effort to empower their employees to do the best jobs possible.

In addition to every employee of Superior Concrete completing a Lean Manufacturing Time Wise[®] workshop, a focused Lean team was in several Kaizen events and a Value Stream Mapping event.

"One of our first efforts focused on our sales department and included four Superior employees," Allen said. "At the same time, we included eight members from five other Oldcastle Precast plants."

The effort proved a great success. "The two teams focused on Superior's priorities and through teamwork and brainstorming developed tools, not only for Superior's road to success, but for the entire Northeast division," Allen said. "In fact, the team-building success from the inter-company participation was a northeast landmark, paving the way for future inter-company Lean events."

The positive results of that Kaizen event, and others that followed, not only affected Superior Concrete, but also the company's sister plants all along the East Coast.

"As a result of the Lean work that has been done, based on our training through Maine MEP, we have experienced savings of approximately \$250,000," said Allen. "We feel this is excellent considering we have only been doing Lean for 18 months."

Allen is especially pleased because Superior's employees have become empowered through the Lean process. "Employees sometimes feel they are always being told what to do and no one listens to their ideas," he said. "Lean changes all that. We definitely want to hear what our employees have to say. I would say we have implemented a constructive communication flow that has everyone involved together."

Superior Concrete's Lean journey has just begun, according to Allen. "We look forward to working with the Maine MEP in the future as we continue through this process," Allen said. "Our company is committed to the Lean process and our Lean journey will never end."

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.