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Hiram Company Finds Big Profits in Maine MEP Technical Assistance

HIRAM – When Walter Butler, president and owner of the New England Castings foundry in Hiram, recently agreed to provide components and sub-assemblies to a railroad hardware manufacturer that provides products for a major city subway system, he knew he owed the Maine Manufacturing Extension Partnership a great big thank you.

“If it wasn’t for the technical assistance I received from the project managers at Maine MEP I probably would not have been in a position to accept the new orders,” Butler said. “In addition, because of MEP’s help, I now have a good chance to become a substantial supplier for a northeastern state’s project to retrofit all its rail cars.”

The value of Butler’s purchase orders for the subway system job is in excess of \$500,000 over a 12-month period.

To say Butler is ecstatic over these developments would be an understatement. While he assumed ownership of the foundry four years ago, the business has been in operation in Hiram since 1985.

Specializing in fractional pound castings, New England Castings is an investment-casting foundry that uses only environmentally friendly, water-based slurries in the production of its shells.

“We were going along,” Butler said, “but I knew we had some things to think about.”

Mainly what Butler had to think about was adding 3,000 square feet to the existing facility of 9,000 square feet. Before he started on that, however, he wanted to be sure the current space was being used as efficiently as possible.

Butler realized the factory was a bit disorganized to the point that it was quite time consuming to get to the metals to be used each day. In addition, the finishing area was being used as a storage area, and there was excessive walking required to other areas of the facility to perform some of the steps required. A clean up would have helped, but Butler decided it was best to learn some Lean principles before beginning.

That's where the Maine MEP came in. "Our project managers are experts at teaching Lean methodologies," said Rod Rodrigue, president of the Maine MEP. "We get frequent calls from manufacturers looking to streamline their operations, clean up their facilities and utilize their employees' time in the best and most efficient way possible."

"I can't say enough about the training everyone here received and how well MEP's project managers fit into our culture," Butler said. "Each of our employees took part in the training and still remain enthusiastic about what they learned. In fact, my employees have initiated activities on their own to further streamline our process."

In reality, what MEP and New England Casting accomplished is amazing. In addition to Lean Training, MEP conducted Kaizen events (rapid improvement workshops) in several areas throughout the factory.

"A Kaizen event in the foundry was focused on organizing and labeling the materials in the area in order to save 20 percent of the work time, and to gain back 50 percent of the usable space" said project manager Jon Kirsch. "The event in the finishing area focused on reducing walking distance by 40 percent, reducing equipment setup time by 15 percent and gaining 50 percent of the space back so it could be used for manufacturing processes."

"We regained floor space all over the building and reorganized the process flow to move equipment to where it is used next," Butler said. "That eliminated footsteps while helping us get rid of things we never used."

In one instance, a task that normally took 45 minutes was reduced to 15 minutes, and 4,000 feet of traveling throughout the facility each day was eliminated.

"The upshot of all this," Butler said, "was that I found that saving all that space allowed me to delay my building addition. Best of all, saving all that time allowed me to consider bidding on the New York and Connecticut jobs because I knew we now could deliver the goods on time."

Just as important, Butler decided to take a major step for a small company. "Our business has always been making components. We made the parts, and then sent them off to someone else to polish, assemble, package and ship to the ultimate customer.

"Now we are doing that value-added work right in-house for the subway job," Butler said.

“Another big step is that New England Castings has grown from 13 to 32 employees,” Kirsch added.

“While Hiram is not in the hub of industrial activity in Maine, I have been fortunate to have found a very talented work group,” Butler said.

Butler feels the same way about the Maine MEP. “When MEP’s project managers come in, I block the entire day off for them,” he said. “Their training, understanding and assistance are invaluable to manufacturers and companies such as mine.”

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.