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Portland Firm Finds Lean Training Makes a Difference

PORTLAND – When Brockway-Smith company officials found themselves behind in their production schedule, they recognized the company needed the assistance of the Maine Manufacturing Extension Partnership (Maine MEP).

“The company had a challenge meeting the demands of their customers,” said Maine MEP project manager Larry Robinson. “But company officials knew they were also limited by square footage. Our goal was to increase production while utilizing the same manufacturing space. A real challenge!”

In business for more than 115 years, Brockway-Smith operates under the name BROSCO. Founded by Louis Brockway and Fred Smith in 1890, the company distributes doors, windows, and specialty millwork, as well as columns, mantels, moldings, posts and stairs through a network of dealers in New England and New York. The company has four manufacturing and distribution centers in New England, the smallest facility being in Portland, Maine with over 100 employees. Its customers include architects, building materials dealers, as well as contractors.

“The company really benefited from a strong regional housing boom,” Robinson said, “and has been experiencing high year-over-year sales growth over the past three years.

However, having challenged themselves to meet this increased sales volume without increasing their facility square footage, Brockway-Smith officials began looking for ways to increase their manufacturing throughput,” Robinson said.

The Maine MEP trained Brockway Smith personnel the principles of Time Wise Lean Manufacturing and Value Stream Management as well as Rapid Improvement through Kaizen. Using these tools, the company optimized facility layouts using new automated equipment in a flexible manufacturing cell orientation. This allowed Brockway Smith to adjust to changes in daily demand by quickly reorganizing their capacity on an as-needed basis.

“With the assistance of Larry and the MEP team, we trained the workforce to become the solution,” said Ray Briere, Brockway-Smith plant manager. “The result has been a 20 to 25 percent increase in production capacity within the facility.

“The Maine MEP helped us realize machine utilization, product flow and placement, along with employee participation, were the keys to this success,” Briere added.

“Flexibility became the key issue for Brockway-Smith,” Robinson said. “When an order is received it might be for a different window/door than the assembly line is set up for at the time. Using Lean manufacturing principles, we worked on the assembly line to ensure that it was flexible enough to change over quickly and meet the demands of the customer.”

The Maine MEP conducted a Kaizen event in the company’s window and door departments and simultaneously conducted 6S training for work place organization. “That seemed to put everything into perspective and allowed the employees to be successful,” Robinson said.

Six S training includes Sort, Set in Order, Shine (keeping equipment and the factory space clean), Standardizing, Sustaining and Safety.

“One of the important things a company needs to do is sustain its changes and maintain the structure of the process,” Robinson said. “That way, waste is easily spotted and the employees can see when things begin to fall back to what we call creeping normalcy.”

Briere could not agree more. “Six S training has contributed immensely to our success,” he said. “It also improved the cleanliness of the shop by having everything in its ‘proper’ place. That promotes a positive attitude and has proven to be a morale boost as well. When just keeping the departments clean makes the job easier it’s a win.”

Briere said the one area that success stands out is in Brockway-Smith’s shop production recovery percentage. “The goal obviously is 100 percent,” he said. “The norm company wide has been below that benchmark. However, the Portland facility has consistently produced over 100 percent, and we have hit as high as 121 percent recovery figure. Obviously, working smarter versus harder really shows results here.”

And, according to Briere, the Portland manufacturing facility has virtually eliminated overtime, which had been averaging 6 to 10 hours per person each week.

While Briere is pleased to give credit to the work of the Maine MEP team, he knows his team still has their work cut out for themselves. “Sustaining the momentum will be the next challenge we will face” Briere added. “However, I am happy to report all is on track.”

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.