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## Lean adventures continue

I think I recently experienced one of those "Ah-ha!" moments that metal fabricators undertaking lean initiatives have pretty frequently.

I was attending a meeting where the subject was improving communication between our ad sales team and our magazine production team. Incomplete and incorrect information was coming from the sales team, and the production team was not being prompt in responding to simple questions, which would delay the sales team's prompt replies to clients' requests. To be honest, personnel changes within our own organization have exacerbated this situation, but we are working through it as best as we can.

Well, the moment of clarity hit me when we began talking about the forms the sales team uses. Each sales person had his or her own version of them. We're talking about five different sales people each with a unique version of an insertion order, which is the permission slip to run an ad, and an ad change form to designate typographical and style changes to existing ads. Our production manager had to search through these many different forms to find the most basic information. Needless to say, she doesn't look at the whole process as an efficient one.

As a result, we're working to create one common insertion order and ad change form. That's probably something that should have occurred a long time ago, but no one ever thought to change it. Sound familiar?

That story has to be familiar to the metal fabricator who has had his eyes pop out of his head after witnessing the hard-to-believe-but-true results of a time study or the final presentation of a spaghetti diagram. Once you've lived through a moment like that, it's hard to ignore some of the basic concepts of lean manufacturing.

**More manufacturers are getting the message.** An RSM McGladrey Manufacturing and Wholesale Distribution national online survey conducted March 11-April 13 with 920 executives revealed that interest in lean principles is occurring all over manufacturing, not just in metal fabricating. A high-technology area such as medical device manufacturing has seen the interest in lean operating principles jump from 61 percent to 87 percent in just one year. No industry is immune from the constant pressure to streamline operations.

Metal fabricators know this all too well. Fortunately many shops have embraced lean manufacturing and are seeing results. If we are to believe the submissions we received for *The FABRICATOR's* Industry Award for 2010, lean thinking can transform a shop in an "extreme makeover" kind of way.

Just this week we notified **General Metal Works**, Mequon, Wis., that it was our newest Industry Award winner. The company joins **Seconn Fabrication, Waterford, Conn.**, and **Schickel Corp., Bridgewater, Va.**, as past winners. Like previous winners, General Metal Works is lean as they come.

The company has removed almost all shelving from the production floor. Raw material is being purchased as close to the day as possible. The production floor is completely paperless. Almost everything rolls around on carts; the company has not had a dedicated forklift operator in more than eight years.

If you want to put a dollar figure on some of these efforts, let's look at the reduction in finished goods inventory. The company has driven down costs from \$100,000 worth of inventory down to \$3,000. It's hard to argue with numbers like that.

Of course, some disbelievers still exist. I have to admit that I chuckled after I saw the results of one lean office initiative around here that led to a dedicated place for a stapler and a paperclip organizer, clearly marked with an empty outline where the two items were meant to go. I'm sure other changes were made, but that was the only visible clue to the outside world. Sometimes the whole story is needed to really sell the impact to others.

In the meantime, I'm pushing for a giant dry-erase board for our atrium. Messages that are written with foot-tall letters are hard to ignore.

Posted At : 10:14 AM. | Posted By : Dan Davis