Strength In Numbers

A collaborative approach leads to success when CME LLC installs a new 2008 Accord starter motor line under the training guidance of Honda's Supplier Support Team and consultant Kepner-Tregoe.

By Anna Wells, Editor

Tom Perreault, program manager at CME LLC, an American Mitsuba company based in Mt. Pleasant, MI.

When Honda is your biggest customer, you make every effort to supply their needs. And if you're determined to achieve world-class operations, you'd take steps to continually refine the process of improving your methods, even if it means starting at the very root of traditional planning and execution.

Such is the case for CME LLC, an American Mitsuba company, Mt. Pleasant, MI. This automotive supplier has been in operation for nearly 20 years, with Honda making up a majority of its sales volume. So when production of Honda's 2008 Accord starter motor meant installing a new production line, company leadership decided to take a new approach, integrating a comprehensive project management technique to the very roots of the process.

To meet the requirements for the ‘08 Accord starter motor line, CME needed to modify its entire armature assembly line, and install the front half of the motor assembly line in time to meet the Honda event schedule.

The result? Not only did CME adequately meet Honda’s need to have the line installed, but CME was able to take away confidence in a method it would be able to apply to future projects.

Independence Day

The basis behind CME’s new approach was a collaborative effort involving Honda and Kepner-Tregoe (KT), a consulting and training organization headquartered in Princeton, NJ. Honda’s pairing of CME with KT was an attempt to help the company hit its deadline for the starter motor under a tight new-model timeframe.

From CME’s perspective, it was about taking a new approach—not just relating to this one installation, but in systematically addressing some of its core problem areas. According to Tom Perreault, program manager, CME, these problem areas included communication, advanced planning, resource scheduling, and follow-through. Perhaps most importantly, CME hoped to gain more self-reliance, to avoid having to rely so much on its parent company, Mitsuba, for these types of projects.

Explains Perreault, “Part of our reasons for partnering with Honda and KT was to help us develop that independence,” he says. “By learning the training techniques that KT and Honda had available, it would help us as a part of that independence development.”

As an initial step, CME gathered a core group of people from various departments

who were interested in becoming subject matter experts in project management.

The KT Way

Specifically, KT's project management centers around three tenets: project definition, project planning, and project implementation. According to KT senior consultant Joe Bennett, a key team member for the Honda/CME project, the process is designed to manage the structure of a project, namely in identifying necessary steps and resources in order to make the flow more organized and time-efficient.

CME was able to modify its entire armature assembly line with the assistance of the Honda Supplier Support Team, and a project management method.

"If you look at project management, you have to understand what your goal is in terms of time, cost, and performance, and then you need to identify all the work required to achieve that goal."

Though this may sound intuitive, the method is not to be underestimated. Perreault will be the first to express concern over CME's previous approach, which he refers to as "white board to white board," where the CME team would address problems by going to a white board and "scratching out what needs to happen," he explains. This was more of a troubleshooting method than an entrenched proactive approach like KT brought to the table. "Even though there were action items and things to be done, there wasn't anybody controlling that process. As much as I tried, it was impossible to control.

"It was very much the customer dictating the pace of the activity, which is very reactive to the customer," he adds. "We had to turn that corner and become proactive ourselves."

Project Management

A company like CME, with 20 years under its belt, is no stranger to training programs. How would management attain the employee buy-in that was so critical to the success of any training initiative? Much of this, according to the CME team, came from KT's specific method of following the training all the way into the application phase.

"The entire approach was different," explains Honda's Fred Braun, Manager, North American Purchasing, Supplier Support. "The key thing was application of the tools as the end result—not just learning the tool, which is typical training."

The program timeline occurred where KT and Honda came into CME's facility for three rounds of training, all six weeks apart. These two-day workshops included one day of classroom training on a project management approach, and another day of application coaching, where the focus was on specifically CME's project at hand—the SM armature line installation.

"It wasn't three days sitting in a chair," explains Pat Rohn, CME SM Value Stream Continuous Improvement Supervisor. "They came in and taught us the basics, and the second day we brought our project in and started working on it. They were there to give us coaching and help us through some of the tough spots, enough so we could take it for the rest of the six weeks and do it ourselves."

CME has adopted a project management method which it can apply to future projects within the facility.

Adds KT's Bennett, "Before we walked away, CME had time for real world application, with coaches available to help them. That allowed for CME, in the time available between instruction, to go out and apply this stuff with a higher level of confidence, knowing that it works, and that they knew how to do it."

A Real Difference

The previous new line installation at CME stands in stark contrast to the SM armature line. Engineers from Mitsuba Japan had come on-site to put the line together for the WR armature about six months ago and, without a cogent method behind the process at the CME facility, things became delayed. Says Rocky Dowell, CME Facilities Supervisor, “The communication between all the various parties did not exist in the WR installation, and we were probably about two weeks behind schedule as far as when the line was actually up and running.”

This meant keeping the Japanese task members in Michigan over their scheduled stay. “Their life is thrown into a turmoil doing this, and we had to ask them to stay twice,” Perreault says. “It was not good.”

The preparedness that the project management approach afforded CME meant that this SM armature installation process, “went a lot more smoothly,” says Dowell. “The relationship improved so much.” The same Japanese task members came to Michigan for the installation, but “they enjoyed being here this time,” he says. “Morale was much higher.”

Self-Reliance

This SM armature line installation actually concluded three days ahead of schedule this time, and for the Japanese task members, this was benefit enough. For CME associates, being involved in the building process meant a lot more.

“Communication was improved, timing, having things in place, having people responsible for being there and knowing what had to be done,” says Tim Neyer, Continuous Improvement Supervisor, PM Value Stream, CME. “Our associates, instead of jumping ahead and trying to firefight any problems that we’d have, assisted the task members, so they actually learned how to set the line up with the task members there.” Adds CME’s Rohn, “With our fusing machine, the original schedule was for the task members to complete one machine, and then in a few months, come back and complete the other machine with the rest of the line. But our associates jumped in and mimicked exactly what the task members were doing on the one machine, and they were able to get both machines done well ahead of schedule,” she says. “By the associates doing that, they learned more about those machines and can troubleshoot them so much more easily now, because they know how to maintain them.”

Other benefits that came from this process for CME came in the ability to acquire the types of tools that could transfer to later projects. CME’s Neyer has already been able to apply the KT methods to other projects in other company value streams. “What we decided when we did this training was to set up templates, so we could go back on different projects, and pick and choose what elements could transfer into the next project.”

Collaborative Efforts

CME’s earlier involvement with Honda’s supplier support activities led to its decision

to apply project management training to the startup of its starter motor line, explains Doug Chamberlain, Staff Administrator, Honda Supplier Support Team. “As we work with our North American suppliers, we emphasize application of these project management tools whenever possible, along with the training,” he said. “CME recognized this, and wanted to work with us to develop these important skills.”

In the end, a successful project is only as good as the people behind it, and this started with the involvement of CME’s leadership, concludes Roy Fraker, Honda Business Administrative Coordinator, who worked with Chamberlain on the CME project. “Working with KT and CME in a three-way partnership, we together delivered this new level of project management training,” Fraker says.

Adds Braun, “I think the real key in making this work wasn’t so much the tools, or the individuals involved. This collaborative approach focused on taking this tool all the way to application, and the end result was a big improvement in the startup of their new assembly line for the ’08 Accord starter motor.”

Sam Bernstine, partner and practice vice president for KT echoes the positive effect of the unique teamwork between all parties. “Quite frankly, the word ‘collaboration’ is quite refreshing in the automotive environment. Honda as a primary customer was really unique because they created the collaboration,” he says. “To the credit of Honda and CME, we actually had three groups functioning together in what ended up being a pretty effective and efficient manner. That, to me, is a credit to Honda’s culture, and CME’s culture.”

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