

Check Mate

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Involvement in non-profit industry organizations has been diminishing over the past several decades, and the most recent economic conditions can't have helped the membership numbers. These environments of peer-to-peer sharing have been usurped by the current trend of fervent protection of proprietary processes and technology—the closed door approach to competition.

It was interesting, then to see a recent announcement highlighting Mate Precision Tooling's accolades from the Minnesota Manufacturer's Alliance as the 2009 Manufacturer of the Year. Amongst the qualities that made this Anoka, MN-based manufacturer of replacement tooling for CNC punch presses stand out included "it's openness in sharing experiences and information to strengthen the local manufacturing community." Openness? Sharing? There are words we don't hear so often anymore. So what's the incentive for Mate?

Organizational Value



Mate's president, Kevin Nicholson is quick to point out the benefits of sharing, especially through a proactive involvement in industry trade organizations. "I think it's a great source for identifying best practices," he says. "Obviously, you can read about lean, but the manufacturer's alliance is great in the sense that you can visit plants and see and feel what they're talking about."

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The MN Manufacturer's Alliance organizes plant visits that ensure companies are in an environment free of their competition. "Everybody just relaxes and really shares everything," says Tom Treuenfels, VP of Manufacturing. "It's a really open atmosphere and network of people for exchange of best practices."

The Kaizen Event

One of the most successful initiatives Mate Precision Tooling has employed—and doesn't mind sharing—is the facility's comprehensive Kaizen program. "It's really given us a tool for continuous improvement out on the shop floor," says Bruce Roles, Senior Manufacturing Engineer.

Adds Treuenfels: "Out of everything we've done in the realm of lean, the Kaizen tool has probably had the biggest impact." Mate's investment in these events has been significant—the company has scheduled Kaizen events every three weeks or so. "To have the ability to go in for a week and take on a problem, to have some sort of a solution at the end is kind of amazing when you've got so many other things going on," he says. "You'd almost like to get to a perpetual state of Kaizen because of the impact of it."

Some of the more successful measures of these Kaizens have included an improvement in maintenance scheduling and execution. "You have limited maintenance resources and they're getting requests from everywhere," explains Nicholson. "We've used it to better define some of our practices and streamline how we deploy maintenance work orders to floor, and how we communicate priorities in terms of which machine needs attention."



Power Tools

One of the other initiatives Mate credits to its success is an ongoing continuous improvement effort towards the Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award. “I really see our Lean efforts and our Baldrige efforts as being very complimentary,” says Nicholson. “Baldrige is the brains, and lean is the muscle—the tactical way we’re going to make improvements.” As a result of Mate’s Baldrige efforts, the company was awarded the Minnesota Council for Quality’s Quality Award Achievement level (See sidebar on page 10 for more information on Baldrige award criteria).

Mate management stresses the importance of the Kaizen events utilized in tandem with Baldrige. “You see the Baldrige as more intensive at the top, and then the tentacles go down,” explains Truenfels.

“If you look at the Kaizen process, it’s very much at the floor level, right where the work is being done, and then sprouts up. The two interlock; they mesh well together.”

At the floor level, some of the most satisfying returns to these continuous improvement efforts have been in employee engagement. “Kaizen is like saying to them, ‘here is your opportunity to do it the way you always thought it should have been done,’” says Truenfels.

“We used to have to sell that point early on when we first started Kaizen,” adds Roles. “Now we do a lot less of that. They know they get to come in every day and have the opportunity to do it the way it should be done, so the expectation is there, and the ideas are already running.”

One of the most poignant successes Mate has seen within its Kaizen efforts has come from a method of bringing in team members in outside departments for Kaizen events. Sometimes the value is in these folks asking the so-called ‘dumb’ questions. “You might bring a person in from purchasing and get them in a strange environment. The person who works there every day may have the same question, but amongst his peers might think, ‘If I ask that question, I’ll look like I don’t know how to do my job.’” There have been a few experiences for Mate’s manufacturing floor where these outside individuals have gotten a discussion rolling, resulting in benefits that wouldn’t have occurred otherwise.

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Peer-to-Peer

For Mate, successful improvement initiatives aren't something to be hoarded. In sharing its processes, the company has even been able to clarify some relationships with its suppliers. "When we get them in a room on a Kaizen project focused on their product, it clears up some of the misunderstandings," says Treuenfels. "With the whole peer-to-peer training model, we have other people who hear about our Kaizen program and want to understand how it works. So we invite them to come in and get dirty and be a part of our labor for a week, and then they take away some ideas from that on how to run a Kaizen event at their own company. And if you want to talk to some people who are really thinking outside of the box—those people who have no clue what we're doing. They ask even more questions."

"We've got a long corporate history of supporting educational efforts," says Nicholson. "I think it's part of our DNA to be sharing; we learn from others in the process."

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