Lessons From The Cupping Room

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I've been through every plant you can think of, whether it produces motors, lawn mowers, refrigerators, treadmills, or Tequila Rose. From construction equipment to breathalyzers — I've seen it all. I even once toured the plant of a manufacturer of caskets, where rows of associates sewed linings with delicate care. And the funny thing is, I'm never disappointed. Every single facility I've had the opportunity to visit has exceeded my expectations through the ways they've found creative, personalized methods to approach continuous improvement.

When I rounded the bend onto Starbucks Way in Minden, Nevada for this month's IMPO Onsite, I realized that my expectations were pretty high. The Starbucks Carson Valley Roasting Plant and Distribution Center looks swanky, with its glass-lined exterior; perched atop the entry is the familiar green siren logo. Like millions of Americans, I've become accustomed to taking my caffeine on the run, and Starbucks is one of the haunts on my regular route. I can admit I've had enough Grande Iced Americanos (easy water, extra ice) to fill a swimming pool or two.

Needless to say, I was excited to see the place and, luckily, Starbucks did not disappoint. We kicked off the facility visit with a trip to the "cupping room" for a coffee tasting with one of Carson Valley's experts, a studied and energetic woman whose passion for coffee was infectious. I found myself wishing I knew more about the roasting and brewing process as we swished and spit uber-fresh coffee into spittoons. Everybody here just seemed to so excited. Maybe it was the caffeine, but I didn't think so.

After the tasting, we spent some time talking about what I came there to uncover, really — the details behind Carson Valley's effort to apply for the AME

Manufacturing Excellence Award, and how they ultimately won. I hope you read the article (starting on page 8) for more detail surrounding this, because the facility's efforts around continuous improvement are enviable. One of the most interesting points related to how the group constructed many of their programs around areas the employees of the plant had interest in (think NASCAR-themed 5S). In fact, applying for the award meant translating the facility's own Lean language into standard terms so AME's evaluation team could understand how Carson Valley was addressing the key areas in question.

I found this approach to be quite fitting. Starbucks is in the unique position of being on a very public stage, meaning the court of public opinion is always in session. For companies like this, oftentimes innovation is key to their ability to remain on top. Perhaps the Starbucks company culture of innovation has bled so far into the roots of the organization, that Carson Valley doesn't think twice about paving their own road on the plant floor and in the distribution center.

I always like to close my interviews with a forward looking question: What's next? When I asked this to the Starbucks Carson Valley team, they stalled for a second and deferred to this culture of innovation. They don't really know what's next, and they're used to it. They're not going to let that get in the way of carving a new niche, inventing their own CI, and giving Kaizen a fresh spin. The focus is on results, rather than retrofitting the latest buzzword process.

It's evident when you're in a facility where the associates really believe in the product, as much as they trust the company behind it. I have no doubt this group will move in a positive trend, coffees in hand, no matter which direction.

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