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A Lesson From The Trenches

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Follow The Yellow Brick Road

This week I drove for an hour and a half to take a tour of a company that manufactures vibration devices. These rather simple looking motorized devices sit there and vibrate on the side of dump trucks, rail cars, and concrete forms. Sounds pretty boring, huh? Actually, not really. And if you invest the five minutes it will take to read this article I will let you in on the most potent strategic weapon available to succeed in this economy and the impending upturn.

The first thing you notice when you enter VIBCO is the smiling faces. Not just on the receptionist but on everyone walking by. Huh? The next thing you begin to feel is the energy, even in the lobby. Huh? How can anyone who works in a mature manufacturing company, in this economy, in a state with one of the highest unemployment rates be happy and energetic? One thing is for sure, if I see it so do customers, and suppliers, and other visitors.

The Chisel That Made The Statue

The actual purpose of my visit and tour was to hear about how VIBCO had implemented Lean Manufacturing techniques into their company processes to achieve competitive efficiencies. I spent almost four hours walking around their facility and listening to office workers, assembly personnel, shipping clerks, and machinists enthusiastically explain how they had redesigned their work spaces and processes to dramatically reduce labor hours and inventory costs. One of the things that really stuck out was the degree of business knowledge these employees had regarding financial and manufacturing performance improvements and there affect on the company as a whole.

Although I was certainly impressed with the improvements that Lean Manufacturing had on VIBCO's business it was obvious to me that this tool was not the primary driver of the success of the company I had just toured. To believe this would be like attributing the greatness of Michelangelo's statue of David to the quality of chisel that he used. So if it wasn't Lean Manufacturing, what was it? I believe that the answer lay in a response I got when I questioned one of the VIBCO floor supervisors.

Consultants and Buzzwords

While walking through the machine shop I asked one of the supervisors the following question, "how long did it take before you believed that changing the way you worked according to Lean Manufacturing principles would actually benefit you and the company?" His response was, "at first I figured here we go again, another consultant with another set of buzzwords. The problem was that this guy didn't go away. He came back week after week after week. That's when I knew this was important and real. So I gave it a try."

The Epiphany

Karl Wadensten, President of VIBCO had been home sick when he got the call. A huge order for a major construction firm was in jeopardy. Unfortunately, both Karl and VIBCO had become quite skilled at fire drills. Also unfortunately, this time it wasn't enough. Karl had enough. VIBCO needed to change, he needed to change, and he needed help. Lean Manufacturing would be the lever he would use to navigate the company in a new direction.

VIBCO's Real Story

I promised if you read this I would let you in on the most potent competitive weapon available to succeed in this economy and beyond. As the chisel did not sculpt David alone, in my opinion Lean Manufacturing did not reinvent VIBCO alone. Rather the men behind those tools first had

to envision what they wanted to create and then find the right tool to make it a reality. You see the most potent strategic weapon available to succeed in this economy and the impending upturn is leadership. Any vibration device company can implement Lean Manufacturing and probably even achieve similar operational results. But not every vibration device company has a Karl Wadensten.

So what do leaders like Karl do that makes them so effective?

- They have vision. George Bernhard Shaw probably put it best. "Some men see things as they are and ask why? I dream dreams that never were and ask why not?" Leaders see things as they could be, share that vision with others, and then take steps to make it a reality. What is the vision for your company?

- They are not afraid to publicly admit they don't know everything. When VIBCO missed the big shipment Karl made a decision to change his and his company's behavior rather than silently blame his employees, fate, etc. He did not sit as his desk alone and wring his hands. This takes self confidence, courage, and high self esteem. Could you do this?

- They are not afraid to get help. Designing devices wasn't VIBCO's high priority problem, building and shipping them was. Karl is an expert in vibration devices not in Lean Manufacturing so he found someone who was. Do you seek help when you don't have the expertise?

- They are enablers. Once Karl found an expert in Lean Manufacturing he enabled both the expert and his employees to move forward into an area that was unfamiliar to him. That takes courage. Do your employees feel comfortable moving forward without your constant supervision and approval?

- They walk the talk. If you want your employees to change their behavior, change yours. The machine shop supervisor didn't believe until he saw that Karl was serious enough to remain committed. Do you walk the talk?

- They are smart enough to value the whole employee. VIBCO pays an hourly wage to have an entire person on site each day. Does it make sense to just have them use their hands? VIBCO now reaps large benefits by having a fully engaged, intelligent, and motivated workforce. What percentage of your employees capabilities are you utilizing every day?

- They're visible and they communicate constantly. Karl sits in an office in the middle of his employees with all glass walls. He can see and hear everyone and they can see and hear him. He is upbeat, highly motivated and a believer in his company. It shows and it is contagious. Guess how much this costs him and his company as opposed to sitting in a corner office out of sight of everyone?

VIBCO has had no layoffs while manufacturing a low tech product in a state with one of the highest unemployment rates in the country. They achieved this by taking market share from their competition as the overall market for their products is down due to the current economic conditions. No wonder the employees are smiling.

Every lesson in this article can be used in your company no matter the industry, product, or service. That's the real leverage of great leadership. It is universal and completely transferrable.

Want to learn how to unleash the most potent competitive weapon in your arsenal?

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