

## Designing the Rubber Factory With accolades to Brian Clements

Funny thing about customers, they seldom seem to place orders on our enterprise that supports level loading or the kind of mix model that our Value Streams seem to like. Of course we employ a suite of tools to absorb that erratic demand, such as Lean, Hyjunkia, one piece flow etc. However several years ago Brian Clements who was then the VP of Manufacturing at Steelcase Canada came up with a very simple concept the “Rubber Factory”.

Brian took the concept of Lean to a whole new level, he truly embraced the notion that there are no titles in a Lean Enterprise and that every employee needs to focus on supporting the customer from a customer’s perspective.

Here is what Brian in essence did. First he cross trained every employee in the organization to be able to perform a value add task in the Value Stream. Then like the design of a modern HVAC system that shuts down certain operations to control energy costs, Brian designed an employee reallocation model that woke be invoked based on incoming customer demand.

If incoming demand exceeded the norm for the day, the organization would reallocate the engineers to work on the lines, if this was not enough then the mechanics would be reassigned and added to the work force ... this would continue throughout the organization including the use of the sales force and even the President. The only person not deployed to the factory floor was the receptionist who still maintained the voice to the customer for that day.

There was a lot of power in this model that went beyond supporting the customer. It completely blurred the lines between management and the team members on the floor. In many cases it allowed the technical disciplines within the organization to spend an extended period of time working and observing a specific operation. We are traditionally very good at jumping into a problem area and then invoking a solution ... but how often do we spend time in a seemingly well run operation to see how we can make it better, safer or simpler?

A friend in Australia took it a step further and closed his maintenance department and included his Mill wrights as bona-fide team members and was amazed with the results. These Mill Wrights were used to being able to identify and implement solutions. As they worked on specific operations that naturally began to implement simple solutions that made work for the Team Members safer and in many cases simpler.

Recently, our La-Z-Boy Dayton campus ran a campaign called “knock it out of the park” to help reduce a significant surge of customer backlog. All of the regular staff was deployed into the plant to produce quality units. As I arrived after the campaign, many employees were still massaging sore muscles, but very proud of the results accomplished.

*“Unless you try to do something beyond what you have already mastered, you will never grow.”*

*Ronald. E. Osborn*

Where Lean Thoughts can become Reality

## Making Idea-Prone Companies

The best by product was the buzz created within the salary folks was an increased sense of urgency to fix broken processes that created disturbances to flow on a regular basis.

Pre-Planning of the rubber factory model is a must so that you can have individuals properly cross-trained and that the model can be implemented immediately. Not sure if you would want to run a multi-million dollar turning centre but he/she may be qualified to become a stock chaser for the day though.

Take some time to design your “Rubber Factory” and make sure you run the model at least 3 times per year ... it is fun, supports erratic customer demand, breaks down barriers and gives people an additional opportunity to see operations up close and personal.

*What I like about the following article, is this is something to consider during your Value Stream Mapping workshops. One of the constant feed-back comments I receive from or employees after a participating in a VSM Workshop is that they have never taken the time to observe the waste they experience every day in the work-place. Conducting a VSM forces you to sit back to observe, reflect and generate ideas to enhance a process, instead of focusing on getting your 100 tons of coal out each day. Think about it ...*

**Give yourself and your employee’s time to think of ideas.** While it can seem that there is never enough time to get everything done and deadlines are always looming, you can’t afford not to take the time to come up with new ideas. Allow even just a few minutes every day to discover what your customers or employees are thinking and what problems or frustrations they may be experiencing. Ask your employees what they are working on, where there may be problems, and what ideas they have for solving them.

**Positively reinforce ideas**—avoid the automatic no. As discussed earlier don’t rush to judge ideas. It’s the process of coming up with ideas that need to be reinforced, not whether the idea is good or not. Evaluation can come later.

**Look to unlikely sources of opportunities.**

You never know where creativity an innovation will emerge. Think beyond your age group, socioeconomic status, and education.

**Get a room with a view.** Give your employees—and yourself—varied experiences. Get away from the office, go visit customers, allow employees to learn one another’s jobs, and so on. It enables people to get a different perspective, and it is when we can change our routine that break-through ideas often can be discovered.

An innovative company does not automatically develop out of an innovative business idea. **You have to deliberately set your expectations and communicate them to your employees.** Remember that recognition is fuel—it fans the fires of creativity and helps your business reach potentials that you may never have anticipated. Einstein said, “Creativity is contagious... pass it on.” As the business owner, you are in a unique position to make sure that people’s brains don’t stop at your company’s door. .

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