Value stream mapping boosts productivity for awning maker

Written by By Claudia Infante, projects coordinator, New Mexico MEP
Friday, 07 October 2016 05:51

Sometimes it just takes a fresh perspective — and expertise in lean manufacturing — to help a respected manufacturer streamline productivity and increase profitability.

The owners of Rader Awning & Upholstery Inc. requested that type of feedback when their 70-year-old company, New Mexico's leading supplier of quality custom awnings and shades, faced challenges satisfying growing demand.

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The company asked New Mexico Manufacturing Extension Partnership to evaluate its operations and offer ideas for improvement. And the rewards of the collaboration were tangible: Productivity improved by 20 percent per salesperson, production defects decreased by 15 percent and installation corrections dropped by 25 percent.

Rader Awning & Upholstering, Inc. was founded in 1947 by the Rader family of Albuquerque and later expanded to Santa Fe. Dan Mowery and Johanne Kosak took over operations in 1974, and Mowery continues to run the business with his daughter Jill Mowery Litt.

Over time, the demand or Rader Awning's products and services outgrew the original processes the company followed to fill orders.

Employees didn't have a system for processing the high volume of orders they received each month, especially when demand surged from spring through fall. When the production team received a large batch of orders that weren't ranked by priority, it often completed the easier ones first and left the difficult, time-consuming jobs for last. This created a deadline crunch that led to rushed jobs and occasional mistakes in production and installation.

Furthermore, instructions and specifications were communicated in complex ways to employees who were skilled in assembly, fitting and sewing but were not fluent in written English. Misunderstandings sometimes caused delays and mistakes.

New Mexico MEP had previously worked with Rader Awning to teach the production team lean techniques and improve the organization of materials and supplies in the company's different departments. The latest project addressed how information flowed from sales to product installation.

For two days, MEP worked with employees from each department to create an administrative "value stream map" that identified each step involved in ordering, creating and installing a product and assessed the purpose of each step to determine if it was essential. By deconstructing and evaluating established procedures, the team developed an action plan to improve efficiency.

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Rather than spending 30 minutes with an order adding highlighted notes that were overlooked, misunderstood or misinterpreted, for example, sales employees started conveying information to the production team with pictures and illustrations and freed their own schedules to process other orders and obtain new business.

Orders now go to the materials department sooner, reducing last-minute shipping costs, and new visual tools help employees determine at a glance how long a job will take and when it is due so projects can be organized accordingly.

Rader Awning is one of dozens of successful New Mexico manufacturers that are hosting public tours of their facilities during this year's celebration of Manufacturing Day. For more information about New Mexico MEP and Mfg Day events taking place during the entire month of October, visit newmexicomep.org/mfgday. To learn more about Rader Awning, visit raderawning.com.

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