

Success Story

Lean Training, 5S Training, Value Stream Mapping

The Worden Company

Holland Manufacturer is Learning Lean Lessons for Library Market

Providing wooden furniture, decorative end panels for shelving, lounge and study seating for libraries and other public institutions since 1949, the Holland-based Worden Company had prided itself on its ability to serve its customers.

But the rise of the bookstore-cum-coffee-house-cum-social-center has libraries reinventing themselves as well in order to compete, driving manufacturers like Worden into new areas of design and custom manufacturing.

“We had been a pretty typical batch-and-queue manufacturer, and we were having some difficulty adapting to the changing marketplace,” explained Tavan Hendrick, Worden’s Vice President of Operations. Used to fulfilling large orders from a catalog of standard offerings, new demands for more stylized, custom furniture saw Worden struggling with lead time, quality and culture issues. “Our target market was changing to a more customized look and we needed to adapt our systems and our people to that new model.”

Hendrick turned to The Right Place, Inc., the West Michigan Regional Office of the Michigan Manufacturing Technology Center, which linked Worden to local lean provider Jim Lewis with The Center for Lean Learning.

Lewis conducted an assessment of Worden’s operations last fall, helping the company identify specific areas of improvement based on performance metrics. Using that data, Lewis worked with Hendrick and the Worden team to develop a learning plan to begin implementing Lean strategies.

Initial improvements included such basics as 5S and lean training for production employees, then quickly moved to more specific projects including reorganizing

the upholstery department to improve flow, and optimizing production materials daily instead of weekly to increase efficiency in the manufacturing process.

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planning a week at a time,” he said. “It’s another step toward a more agile, lean environment, and away from that batch mentality.”

As part of its lean journey, Hendrick said the team also discovered that while there was some customization to each order, there were many commonalities the team could build upon to increase efficiency.

“We did several value stream maps of different processes and discovered that we are a mixed model operator,” he explained. Orders may vary according to fabric, material or style, but the process by which the products are produced is the same. “Once we identified that, we were able to concentrate on the process and work on creating efficiencies that are independent of product styling or order size.”

The company has completed set-up reduction projects in its CNC department and banding department where solid wood trim is applied to veneered panels. A third set-up reduction project has just begun in the company’s finish mill department where finish machining, drilling and boring is completed on parts of varying size and shape.

“There are a lot of little parts and pieces in there, so it’s one where we’re going to see a lot of gain from this process,” he said. “We’ve just started with the 5S process and we’ve already reduced our floor space for that department by 30 percent .”

Nine months into their lean journey, Hendrick is seeing the pay-off.

Our on-time order completion has improved 20 percent, inventory turns are trending up, and revenues per labor dollar spent are trending up as well, “ he said. “One of our 18-month goals is a 50 percent reduction in work-in-process and we are on track to reach that. Any manufacturer knows, that’s free money that’s not sitting on your shop floor. It’s a significant savings for us.”

With the company facing increasing cost pressures, becoming a lean and flexible enterprise is as much about market share as it is about profitability, Hendrick said.

“We feel that embracing lean is the only way we are going to survive in the long term,” he said. “We’ve seen a trend in the architecture and design community to relax design specifications in favor of a lower price, especially in these public and non-profit projects where there are increasing budget constraints. It’s our only option for long-term sustainability.”

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Website: www.wordencompany.com

Established: 1949

Employees: 135

Products: Wooden library furniture, desks, chairs, tables, shelving, decorative end panels for cantilevered shelving, lounge and study seating

Industries: Education, institutional

