



Practical Benchmarking

Community of Practice: Lean is About Sharing

Central Container Corporation and Uni-Solar benchmarked, then implemented ideas from fellow members.

Central Container: “Diving Deeper” for Sustainability Gains

Manufacturing practitioners can strengthen lean/improvement performance through involvement in the AME/APQC Community of Practice (CoP), according to Ed Polin, Central Container’s lean enterprise manager and president of AME’s North Central region. Central Container is a Minneapolis, MN designer and manufacturer of packaging solutions for a diverse customer base including medical companies. During a recent AME/APQC CoP webinar, Polin shared his “lessons learned” that resulted from an inquiry to the group.

Polin said he’d been looking for additional ways to improve Central Container’s sustainability performance. Reducing consumption of materials, energy, and other resources is not only a concern for many of his company’s customers, it also represents a significant opportunity to reduce costs *and* operate in a more environmentally-friendly manner, he said. During a CoP webinar earlier this year, he learned about the potential of entering into a sustainability initiative review service. The resulting scrutiny of the company’s carbon impacts and its requirements for suppliers and contractors, as well as participation in the Green Suppliers Network (greensuppliers.gov/gsn)

have already netted measureable results. Recycling and reusing more scrap materials, traveling less, and other changes have made the difference at Central Container. The company had already committed to reducing the amount of scrap going to a landfill, but wanted even greater reductions in resource usage. Last year, employees baled 3.5 million pounds of corrugated scrap for recycling. “That’s equivalent to saving more than 10,000 trees, and it also decreased the fuel and labor needed to cut, transport, and process the trees,” Polin said.

Better control of printers and desktop computers is another good idea gained from CoP members, as recounted by Polin. Reduction in paper usage by printing on both sides of the paper and instituting a PC power-off requirement when they are not being used have helped Central Container reduce related resources consumption. “We also got an idea from the webinar about reducing our cost and usage of the cartridges for printers,” said Polin. “By centralizing printer locations, as well as consolidating and centralizing printer cartridge storage, we have greatly reduced our stores of obsolete cartridges.”

Polin also learned about the SmartWay Partnership during the CoP webinar. Sponsored by the U.S. EPA (Environmental Protection Agency), it offers information and

suggestions for cutting freight transport fuel use and carbon emissions (www.epa.gov/smartway). “We extended SmartWay concepts in our fleet and shared them with our suppliers,” Polin said. “One related change: Truck drivers waiting to deliver material at our plant used to leave their trucks running, contributing to a dangerous buildup of carbon monoxide. Now we ask the truck drivers to turn off their engines while they are waiting by the plant. Our carbon monoxide levels in that area dropped by 50 percent.

“Webinars are an economical way to benchmark against other companies in sustainability and other areas,” Polin said. “Participating has helped us to dive deeper — to realize how the little things we are doing can add up over time.”

Uni-Solar: Finding a Better Way to Encourage and Implement Employee Suggestions

Ed Sosnowski, corporate lean manager of Uni-Solar (United Solar Ovonic), Auburn Hills, MI also shared sustainability learnings gleaned from AME/APQC CoP members during the webinar in which Polin presented. Based in Rochester Hills, MI, Uni-Solar manufactures commercial solar roofing systems.

“We had been looking for a better way to develop our Improvement Implementer (I²) System that we started two years ago,” he said. “It’s a way of working with employees’ suggestions for improvements so that they can implement their ideas themselves while avoiding the typical pitfalls of a suggestion system. We started benchmarking at the AME annual conferences in 2007 and 2008, and then put an inquiry out to the CoP. We got suggestions for roadblocks to avoid, so we don’t de-motivate employees who offer improvement suggestions, and we found ideas for reducing the time to implement improvements. We also borrowed an idea for visual systems.

“On our ‘People Powered Improvement’ wall in the plant, we display information about ideas that have been implemented and the employees or teams who suggested them,” said Sosnowski. The wall also has information on the number of improvements implemented by month, the

number of ideas on deck and under review, the days to complete improvements (a key metric since the program is about velocity), first-time quality (were ideas returned to the initiator for modification or rejected), etc. “For completed items there is a simplified form that includes the idea/problem statement, the solution, and the team/individual that implemented it so people can quickly review ideas that have been implemented,” Sosnowski added. “If people want to find out more, the actual form is stored behind it. This serves as recognition for the team as their peers review the completed improvements on the wall. (See Figure 1.)

“Our Improvement Implementer program is a self-regulating system,” he explained. “When suggestions come in, they are reviewed by a designated supervisor and then those set for implementation (after evaluation by employees on all four shifts) go ‘on deck’ on our board. We can only work

on a certain number of improvements at one time, and these are tracked as changes are made and results are recorded by our teams. For each suggestion going ahead, we use a modified A3 form and PDCA (Plan-Do-Check-Act) concepts so that the people making the changes are learning problem-solving skills at the same time.” Cycle time, cost reduction, decreased paper usage, and other improvements are among those resulting from People-Powered Improvements ideas.

“We will continue to use the CoP to hook us into like-minded companies striving for operational excellence,” said Sosnowski. “You get a response to your questions in hours, not weeks. We’ve gotten ideas for improving our process, avoiding roadblocks, and validating our process. Lean is about sharing, reflected in the CoP.”

Lea Tonkin, Target executive editor, lives in Woodstock, IL.



Figure 1. “People Powered Improvement” wall at Uni-Solar’s Greenville, MI Plant 1 showcases their Improvement Implementer System and completed improvements generated and completed by team members.

Editor’s notes: “A Natural Affinity between Lean and Green” is Ed Polin’s topic for a presentation at the AME Kentucky 2009 conference; he emphasizes how applying lean strategies to reduce waste results in consuming fewer materials and less energy.

The AME/APQC Community of Practice (CoP) offers virtual benchmarking opportunities by providing an open forum for practitioner-to-practitioner exchanges by submitting questions to the members of the CoP. In CoP webinars, subject matter experts share best practices. To participate in the AME/APQC benchmarking CoP and learn how to search the APQC performance measurement service — the Open Standards Benchmarking Collaborative (OSBC), check www.ame.org and click on “Benchmarking” and then “Community of Practice” or go to www.apqc.org/ame.