

Manufacturer catches fire with lean processes

*Crimson Fire, Brandon, S.D., is still busy making fire trucks,
and its new production flow keeps operations from overheating*




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Dan Davis, editor-in-chief of The FABRICATOR, can be reached at dand@thefabricator.com.

Taking education into your own hands

Why wait for educational institutions to produce the right workers?

When an Oberg tool needed repair in the field, a precision-made part could be shipped out for quick replacement. A similar tool in a similar predicament required a service call from the toolmaker because his one-of-a-kind creation needed his personal touch.

Oberg's commitment to high-quality performance, in both manufacturing and people development, spurred his creation of a formal apprenticeship program that still exists today. Whereas the original program covered 17 different disciplines, Oberg Industries' apprenticeship program now has six tracks: precision toolmaker, precision grinder, die engineer, EDM operator, heat treater, and precision die component specialist.

"Employee cross-training and continuous improvement were always imperative to Don. He believed that it was every employee's responsibility to pass along knowledge and teach not only newcomers, but also one another," Chambers said. "Employees would enjoy professional growth and improved skill sets with each job. The company would benefit because employees constantly found new and more efficient ways to get the job done, affecting the bottom line. Overall, it was a winning combination."

Chambers said he believes the program has produced large dividends for the company over the years. Almost 500 employees have gone through the apprenticeship ranks at Oberg, and they now occupy positions at all different levels and locations within the company. Chambers, in fact, was an Oberg apprentice 25 years ago.

"We still need skilled labor," he said. "We are really working against a culture where 20 years ago you might fix your own car... People had more of a chance to learn about mechanized things. In our society today, unless you are from a rural area, you just aren't exposed to those things."

The Oberg program is not a work-during-the-day and attend-night-school arrangement. The company takes those applicants who pass a pre-employment test and brings them on as full-time employees, even though they

are apprentices. All classes and on-the-job training occur during the workday.

By the time the apprenticeship program is complete (the length of the programs varies based on the apprentices' abilities to grasp subject matter), graduates have their journeyman's papers and a certificate from the National Institute of Metalworking Skills. Dave Crawford, Oberg Industries' human resources manager for recruitment, said he estimated about \$250,000 is invested in each employee by the time he or she completes the apprenticeship program.

"I think [the apprenticeship program] is going to be important to the survival of Oberg," Crawford added.

Oberg Industries' efforts and those of other companies will help to raise the profile of manufacturing as well. Chambers said he thinks about 40 manufacturing companies have been started over the years by former Oberg Industries apprentices. With disciples like that, it's hard to ignore the gospel according to Oberg.

Chambers stressed that other manufacturers need to get over the fear that training employees only makes them more valuable and a possible flight risk when someone else has a little more money to offer. They need to have "courage" to train, he said.

Training doesn't have to be complex. A company might concentrate on simple skills or manufacturing practices, instead of comprehensive educational courses. After all, training can help to build a culture as well as an overall company knowledge base.

Companies also can join forces with other nearby manufacturers, sharing training costs. Together, smaller companies might have more success chasing work force development funds from state and federal government sources.

Still thinking that such an educational effort is too much to take on? Donald Oberg implemented his training philosophy when he had only 12 employees. In this case, size doesn't really matter.

Dan Davis

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