

Establishing and Sustaining a Successful Lean Flow Culture



Culture: the set of shared attitudes, values, goals and practices that characterize an organization.

Lean flow techniques are benefiting businesses of all sizes and types, including the horticultural or "green" industry. Why? Well, lean techniques themselves are tangible, time-tested, fact-based and common sense, focusing on maximizing quality and added value, eliminating non-value-adding work and minimizing response time to the customer.

A lean culture is just as important as the lean techniques. Successful lean flow businesses establish repeatable lean flow techniques as a strategy. They then exercise and sustain this strategy through their policies, procedures and measures, every day, over and over, as a culture or way of life. A key, then, to achieving sustainable lean flow benefits is in establishing and sustaining a successful lean flow culture. North Creek Nurseries, a wholesale propagation nursery headquartered in Landenberg, Pennsylvania, USA has done just that.



Cleaning Trays Progressively

Like many horticultural businesses, North Creek's operating costs and pricing pressures continually increase, and its margins were shrinking. Founder Steve Castorani and General Manager Tim McGinty knew that a fundamental change would be essential. As Steve puts it, "revenue hides all sins - until times get tough." Why did North Creek select lean flow as a strategy to help with their challenges?

Steve and Tim had business acquaintances - and even competitors - who had related their success with lean, and they had also read articles on lean in various horticulture trade journals. They knew that North Creek's operations had to become efficient to remain competitive. Steve saw a compelling lean flow presentation at the International Plant Propagators' Society, led by Gary Cortés of FlowVision, LLC and Dave van Belle of Van Belle Nurseries, and learned even more as he chatted with them afterwards. At this point, Steve had confirmed lean's worthiness as a business strategy.

Tim knew that North Creek's facilities needed many updates, so he contacted landscape architect Robert Hayter. Tim was somewhat surprised by Hayter's observation that facility updates would not fix inefficient, non-lean processes. After taking Hayter's two-day

Optimum Provision Management course, and reading "The Toyota Way," Tim was convinced that North Creek needed to implement lean.

Steve and Tim realized that to establish and sustain lean benefits, they would need to change the North Creek culture and transition their workforce into that culture, and for this they would need proven outside lean expertise. To begin this effort for themselves and their employees, they began Jim Paluch's Working Smarter program. For the physical and logical lean transformation of their operations processes, Steve and Tim engaged FlowVision, LLC.



North Creek Supermarket

Has North Creek Nurseries been successful in establishing and sustaining a successful lean flow culture? In 2010, they began educating and involving their workforce. In 2011, with FlowVision's assistance, they transformed their very challenging shipping processes. Tim candidly observes that not everyone was interested in adopting the new culture and practices, and North Creek had some employee turnover as a result. North Creek, its workforce and its customers are now enjoying the benefits of their successful lean flow culture - better productivity and repeatability, increased predictability, optimized facility usage and product flow, rare weekend overtime, no seven-day weeks and no need for transferring production workforce to shipping.

North Creek's lean culture continues to move ahead. As for those facility upgrades, they are in the works. The workforce will soon be learning and using more lean techniques, such as 5S. The production processes are to be redesigned using the proven lean flow tools that improved shipping.

Steve's lean goals range from fundamental to lofty: He wants North Creek to continue, and to be successful into the future. He's determined to provide processes, products and facilities that the employees can take pride in,

Steve says frankly, "There's a point where you've got to stop making excuses" and make the lean culture change. He continues that a successful lean flow effort "gets everybody to take ownership and get involved." Steve's advice for those considering undertaking the lean flow journey: See your long-term goals and stick with them to get there, because "the business can pull you away from what's important."

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Steve Castorani – President North Creek Nurseries