

Being A Real Tool

By Jeff Reinke, Editorial Director, Manufacturing Group

Today is my first day in the office this week, as the first two allowed for a dynamic range of visits that ran the gamut from medical equipment firms to a private label chocolate processor. No offense to the good people at the surgical device companies, but the tempting smells and allure of the subject matter (along with a couple of sweet samples that were so graciously provided) made the chocolate company portion of the trip a definite highlight of this sabbatical from the office environment.

However, despite what the headline might suggest, the ability to gorge myself on free chocolate during the three-hour drive home was not the greatest takeaway from this stop. Rather, it was what Richard Gordon, the president of Chocolate Potpourri, said to me about his approach to production flow, operational efficiencies and company innovation.

At one point our conversation turned to how he deals with competing in a marketplace populated by a number of very large competitors. This dynamic, combined with current economic conditions, offers a number of inherent challenges – many with which I’m sure we can all commiserate. He indicated that despite their size, his company strives to be very progressive in the way they tackle these potential obstacles. In particular, he referenced his experiences with Six Sigma and Lean Manufacturing. This alone is far from new, but his manner of implementing what he was exposed to offered some great perspective for processors of all sizes and market segments.

“It’s not the tools that these strategies give you,” stated Gordon, “but the way you use them. You can’t copycat the Toyota Production System and expect it to work at your facility. That goes against what a continuous improvement strategy is all about. You need to take bits and pieces of what you learn and customize it for your facility and work environment.”

Basically, it’s not about the tools, but how you use them. It was a mantra that was well impressed upon me throughout our time together. And while the size and scope of his operation might differ from yours, his perspective on implementing best practices and striving for greater innovation underscores a common need.

The clichés regarding greater operational efficiencies are well ingrained in our heads. We continue to embrace the charge of lean manufacturing best practices and white papers, and we acknowledge the potential impacts that an overall Six Sigma approach can have on our processing endeavors.

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Published on Chem.Info (<http://www.chem.info>)

My point is that it's easy to get on the bandwagon and laud their implementation. However, at the end of the day it's not about what these practices can do, but how we make them our own in realizing what they will do.

The products that a company like Apple puts out are great. However, despite his success I don't think Steve Jobs' approach to product development is the right fit for every environment. That said, there are a number of principles, like Apple's focus on innovation, ability to look beyond just the product in creating new markets around their products, and an overall drive to be first to market, that are worthy of closer looks.

We live in an age dominated by markets that want everything tweaked a little to match their specific needs. So whether we're talking about new recipes, unique batch sizes or specialized packaging approaches, I think it's going to be more and more important to not only personalize the process, but the approach as well.

Source URL (retrieved on 08/03/2015 - 9:10am):

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