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Bush Hog® going ‘lean’

The name “Bush Hog” arguably is the defining moniker in the world of rotary cutters. Since the company was founded in Selma, Ala. in 1951, Bush Hog has surpassed simply being a brand name. The term has achieved verb status, where the process of mowing a field is even called “bush hogging.”

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Lean manufacturing is based on the Toyota production system from the Japanese automotive industry. It is designed to improve process efficiency by incorporating a problem-solving culture to eliminate waste and non-value-added activities.

“We looked at Lean from a number of different sources under a number of different names,” said Bush Hog President and CEO Dennis Webster. “What ultimately sold us on ATAC are its hands-on approach and understanding that the training has to come before the process results in significant savings.”

Under the leadership of ATAC Lean Team Leader Hank Czarnecki, ATAC has since January facilitated more than 40 classes in Lean 101 (Principles of Lean), Value Stream Mapping, Five-S, Total Productive Maintenance, Quick Changeover, and is beginning to implement kaizen, or continuous improvement events.

“Bush Hog has as its mission to make Lean the way that the company conducts its business,” Czarnecki said. “This can only be achieved by

teaching the basic principles of waste elimination and efficiency improvement to everyone in the organization, and then, expanding that knowledge level so that it can be applied and sustained in production, management and administrative activities.”

A training undertaking such as the one underway at Bush Hog is a significant investment in time, money and commitment, Webster notes. Webster personally visits training classes and talks with employees about the process, the need for Lean, and the desired and expected results.





Lucille Canty works in the single-spindle cutter assembly area. The area recently underwent a Lean kaizen that increased its production efficiency by as much as 50 percent.

“I spend a lot of time explaining that this training is a tool, and that we are not implementing Lean as a way to eliminate jobs,” Webster said. “I remind every class that management is behind the implementation of Lean 100 percent. It has to be in order for it to work.”

Lean manufacturing is customer driven. Production is “pulled” by customer demand, not “pushed” by forecasts as under traditional manufacturing. As a result, cost savings can be achieved in numerous ways – including reduced inventory and transportation.

“Bush Hog® has traditionally been a ‘batch’ manufacturer,” Webster adds. “This results in the accumulation of a lot of product inventory, and maintaining excessive product inventory is expensive.”

Following the Lean system, Webster anticipates that the expense associated with excessive inventory will be virtually eliminated; that production efficiency and quality will improve; costs across the board will be reduced; and ultimately, the company will be more competitive – which means that jobs are actually more secure.

“We explain up front that our mission is to help keep

jobs in Alabama, and we will not even begin a program with a company if we know they intend to use it as a means for eliminating jobs,” Czarnecki said. “Jobs may be changed through the implementation of Lean, but the intent is that such changes are for the better.”

Bush Hog® employees already are beginning to see the improving nature of Lean-influenced job changes. A recent Lean kaizen in its single-spindle cutter assembly area resulted in a 50 percent increase in its normal production efficiency utilizing less space and the same number of employees, according to Webster.

“We did not increase workloads or shift length,” Webster said. “We only changed the process. By simply making changes in the way product flows through the assembly area, we immediately improved efficiency.”

Bush Hog® produces three major classes of cutters: Its single-spindle rotary cutter with a mowing radius of from five to 10.5 feet; a multi-spindle cutter that can clear an area of up to 12 feet wide; and its large flex-wing cutter with retractable triple decks that can shear an area up to 20 feet wide in a single pass. The company also manufactures a line of zero-turn commercial-grade mowers, as well



Hank Czarnecki leads a Quick Changeover exercise during a recent training session at Bush Hog®. ATAC ultimately will train all 850 of the company’s employees in Lean.

as a Bush Hog® utility vehicle and a variety of after-market tractor attachments.

“Implementing Lean into all of these manufacturing areas is going to be accomplished along a deliberate and planned process,” Webster adds. “We already are seeing that it can be achieved with great success, but it involves much more than simply rearranging the plant.

“We can go in and rearrange the production area in a couple of weeks. What we’ve got to ensure is that we also are changing our culture. It can take several years to make a culture change of this magnitude, but we have to begin developing a track record to prove that we are as reliable as we say.”



Auburn Technical Assistance Center was established in 1976 and is an affiliate of the Alabama Technology Network and an Economic Development Administration University Center. As an arm of the Auburn University College of Business Outreach program, ATAC provides business and technical assistance, customized training, and consultation in implementing value-added strategies to manufacturers and other businesses, not-for-profit organizations and government agencies in Alabama and the Southeast.

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