

Friday, June 19, 2009

Corporate Lean manager visits HRD 304

Edward Sosnowski, the corporate Lean manager of United Solar Ovonic (Uni-Solar) headquartered in Rochester Hills, was a guest speaker Monday, June 8 at **HRD 304: Lean Principles and Practices in Organizations**, taught by Special Education Instructor Mark Doman.

Sosnowski's presentation at the Educational Resources Lab in Pawley Hall centered on the progress of Uni-Solar as a Lean enterprise.

"A Lean enterprise is an entire organization that operates using Lean rules and principles," Sosnowski said.

"Everyone from accounting to HR to product development is applying these concepts to eliminate waste from their internal processes, problem solving, establishing high agreement, etc. In a Lean enterprise, there is an alignment of goals and objectives from the top to the very bottom of the organization; everyone knows how they affect the top-level company goals and how that impacts the customer."

In order to achieve this, there are many strategies that Uni-Solar has developed, but the main focus of their efforts is on development of their people, whether it's in the hiring or training processes, or in creating a learning organization.

"The benefits are many, but in a very simple high-level perspective, they make the company more profitable," Sosnowski said. "Imagine a company where their processes only had the exact right amount of resources, produced exactly the right amount of product for the customer when they wanted it and with 100% quality. That is what Lean is striving for. While that may be panacea, if you strive for perfection you will attain excellence along the way."

The company aims to properly orientate team members, which includes a lot of effort in training, retraining and keeping them engaged, while also having a rigorous hiring process.

"Training, training and more training was what our focus was," Sosnowski said.

Sosnowski said that they not only want to train people the right way but also help them understand why things are done the way they are.

"If people don't know why they're doing what they're doing, they're less likely to do it or take a shortcut here or there," he said.

A difference between the Uni-Solar Greenville location, which began utilizing Lean concepts from the time they hired their first person, and the one in Auburn Hills can be seen by their turnover statistics, with the Auburn Hills campus being significantly higher than that of the Greenville campus.

"The culture is obviously different from one campus to another," Sosnowski said. "It is much more difficult to change an existing culture and habits, but Auburn Hills is making good progress."

The Auburn Hills location, which has been around seven years, didn't commit to their Lean journey until two and a half years ago, about the same time that the Greenville campus was opening up with Lean philosophy behind everything they do.

"For those companies like ours who are fairly early in on our journey, the benefits [of Lean] are reduced lead time to the customer, improved product quality, an engaged workforce who contributes to problem solving and ideas for improvements, and a culture of continuous improvement so we're constantly getting closer to the ideal state," Sosnowski said.

Lead time reductions come from establishing better control over inventory with pull systems, such as kanban, which result in better responsiveness to the end customer, reduced inventory holding costs and reduced impact of quality-related failures, Sosnowski said. Part of its continuous improvement, Uni-Solar receives a cross-section of opinion by conducting surveys and getting feedback from its employees.

"You just keep surfacing more opportunities to improve; it is a never-ending journey," Sosnowski said.

The company is working to develop its own internally certified Lean practitioners who will go through a new certification process that takes six months. According to Sosnowski, this is a beneficial process.

"That way we're not spread thin. We spread the fire," he said.

As far as outside Lean certificates go, Sosnowski said, "Once you've been a Lean practitioner for ten plus years and can show the track record, it probably doesn't matter. However, some companies may start to ask for certificates in order to standardize their hiring process. I'll put it this way: it certainly cannot hurt, especially early on in your career."

According to Sosnowski, organizations across the world are embracing Lean because of the hyper-competitive global marketplace and the necessity to do more with less.

"I think the job outlook for being someone with Lean talent/knowledge/experience is very good," Sosnowski said. "More and more companies are opening their eyes to the impact of Lean concepts in so many different industries. That is the appeal to me. This is not something that is done in automotive or aerospace, manufacturing or service, the principles apply everywhere; the tools you use to get there are different."

Sosnowski said he has seen areas of Lean growth in healthcare, aerospace, construction, medical instruments and military. Some Lean practitioners include Intel, Harley Davidson, Dana, Southwest, Tesco and the Detroit Medical Center, whose 30-minute ER guarantee is a Lean program.

Uni-Solar is looking for people that understand and embrace Lean principles. However, one problem that Sosnowski said he's encountered is that colleges aren't talking about Lean, and they can't find people who've heard of it.

"I believe that having Lean skills is very valuable in the workplace and at this point is a pretty rare skill set, so it can provide job security," Sosnowski said. "How well valued you are depends on the level of buy-in from your organization. I've been in both types of organizations, and if they buy in, it can be an outstanding role."

For more information about HRD 304 and other Lean courses, visit www.oakland.edu/lean.



Edward Sosnowski talks to HRD 304 about Uni-Solar's progress as a Lean enterprise.

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