

# COLUMBUS BUSINESS FIRST

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## ENTREPRENEUR



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**Exterior Portfolio's Jeff Byczynski, left, helped lead a review of operations at the housing products maker that included management and front-line employees.**

## All together

BY SCOTT RAWDON / FOR BUSINESS FIRST

**I**t's one thing for managers to talk to their employees about promoting continuous improvement within a company. But, for it really to happen, employees must talk to each other and, most importantly, talk to their managers.

"You have to have open and honest communication up front. It can be a little challenging at the beginning," said Bob Mullins, quality assurance manager for Columbus-based Exterior Portfolio by Crane, a manufacturer of home exterior siding and other decorative touches.

Mullins and other Exterior Portfolio executives told a recent audience

**EXTERIOR PORTFOLIO EMPLOYEES** took it upon themselves during the housing boom to try to figure out how to do things better. Then the market turned, bringing an entirely new set of issues.

at the Conway Center for Family Business at Ohio Dominican University how they worked with the business improvement firm Definity Partners to streamline and improve daily operations over the past four years. They said the companywide changes resulted in manufacturing cost savings of 14 percent, and recordable safety incidents dropped by 53 percent compared with 2006.

"A lot of things were breaking loose back then," said Jeff Byczynski, who directs the manufacturer's operations.

The housing industry was booming at the time and Exterior Portfolio was swamped with orders. Byczynski said executives needed to implement some business metrics and become better organized. Management turned

# IMPROVE: *Everyone can get better*

to TimberTech, a sister company in the Crane Plastics family, for some lessons. TimberTech also had partnered with Definity, which helped TimberTech streamline its operations and eliminate waste, which sounded like a good idea.

"I was impressed with how swiftly this worked," Bycynski said.

## NEW ERA

Ironically, Bycynski said, Exterior Portfolio partnered with Definity to learn how to handle too much business.

"Then all of a sudden, things slowed, and slowed, and slowed," he said.

Definity helped Exterior Portfolio implement "Lean Training" techniques to get the company through one of America's worst housing slumps.

Bycynski said Lean Training is management asking employees how the company can make their jobs easier; it's not telling them what they should be doing. It's also providing training and certification for employees who want to improve their skills.

"Lean Training is change, saying it's OK to challenge the status quo," Bycynski said.

Bycynski said once the lean practices took hold, something amazing happened – champions emerged.

It soon became apparent, he said, which employees cared most about their work and wanted to improve themselves and their work environment.

"We've identified the champions and we just let them go for it," he said. "We found the people who wanted to make a difference."

For example, Bycynski said some employees had been doing the same job, in some cases for decades, and they knew the processes well. The more ambitious of these employees were promoted to train new hires and to other leadership positions.

Definity Partners President Jay Kuhn said elevating front-line employees who have worked in one position for a long period into leadership positions is a key move.

"They drive the continuous improvement," he said.

The goal is to free upper management's time so it can focus on growing the business and not be burdened with the company's daily operations, he said.

## GETTING BUY-IN

Asking employees for their opinions and giving them opportunities to learn sounds like something most would embrace, but Process Engineering Manager Tom Daniels said the



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**Exterior Portfolio employees, from left, Tom Daniels and Jeff Bycynski follow manufacturing procedures that have been tightened since the company underwent an operations review.**

idea initially was met with some skepticism.

"People associated it with staff reduction," he said. "We had to completely diffuse that."

Management had to convince employees, in other words, that it was fine to make mistakes and to try new ways of doing things.

Bycynski said employees also needed to be convinced that Lean Training wasn't merely the "flavor of the month" – that it was the way things would be done from there on.

"There was some conflict, but that's not all bad," Daniels said.



**J. Kuhn:** Definity Partners president

He said when you start asking employees for their opinions, disagreement is inevitable.

But from disagreement comes discussion, and that's when things really begin to change, he said.

For those employees willing to buy into the effort, Exterior Portfolio enrolled them into Definity's Green Belt Certification program to help front-line employees become leaders.

"You have to pique their interest a bit," Daniels said.

The certification includes a week of classroom training where employees develop results-oriented projects to be completed in the workplace during the following eight to 10 weeks.

An additional week of classroom training helps the employees evaluate their projects' success and explore methods to maintain it.

Exterior Portfolio has 320 people going

through certification training, Daniels said.

Bycynski said he's seen the results.

"We definitely are better," he said. "Definitely people are more open. They want to come to work."

## EVERYONE INVOLVED

Daniels said upper management needed to focus on its own continuous improvement as well.

"We saw a company doing well, but success was hiding the problems," he said.

Before the housing slump, Daniels said it was all Exterior Portfolio could do to keep up with demand. He said it's easy to let things like the amount of scrap generated at a work site, the amount of inventory, or the amount of time it takes to gain approval on projects lapse, particularly when the company is making a strong profit.

The market plunge forced management to take a close look at what they were doing.

Bycynski said they focused more on quality control, exploring the remodeling market and employee safety.

"Our customers could see that we were different," he said.

The company also improved its contact with clients to ensure customer loyalty, he said.

Ultimately, Bycynski said Exterior Portfolio improved its operations to where management could really concentrate on long-term planning and exploring new product lines.

"We never used to," he said.