

Workplace program trains students, future leaders

By Dave Cranshaw, Staff Writer

Don Nester is a problem solver. His goal is to prepare the world's future thinkers through the Rhode Island



Manufacturing **Don Nester** feels a strong school system can help the state's work force.

Extension Services' WorkPlace Skills Applied Learning Program.

"If I show them the applications ... I can make a passion then make things happen," said Nester, stressing that the concepts are not only geared toward manufacturing but can be applied to all occupations.

PBN: Can you explain the workplace skills program?

NESTER: As a former plant manager, I would get young people right out of college or high school and I would ask them questions like: 'Do you understand what a process is? What cause and effect is? Do you know how to work in a team environment?' Some would have an idea but most would not. That means some of my training dollars have to go to re-educate or educate kids just entering the job market. I feel those dollars are better spent in schools. I read that companies spend about \$95 billion on all types of training. If we take some of that money and use it in the school systems – where kids could find out about themselves, how to work in a team-based, problem-solving environment and show the concepts of lean and Six Sigma – we would be a powerhouse in the global economy. It also includes critical thinking, math skills and communication skills. The program is a perfect transition to the chalk and talk of what you learn in the classroom to real applications that happen in the workplace.

PBN: To whom is this program geared?

NESTER: The student that has the most to gain from the program is the person that is

just going to graduate high school. With that said, college-bound students would benefit from this just as much. This teaches you how to look at data and make good decisions based on data and root cause analysis and how to look at waste. Every student could benefit from the program. We have run four pilot programs with tremendous results. The kids come out as real continual improvement thinkers. In one program at Coventry High School, students came up with a recycling effort that would actually put money back into the school budget.

PBN: What are the plans for the future of the program?

NESTER: We have been trying to get funding. Unfortunately, the school systems are strapped for cash. We have had a little bit of success at the state government level. The education alliance at Brown University and the Environmental Protection Agency are very interested in the program. For an initiative like this, we really need to teach the teachers how to teach it.

PBN: Two industry terms are 'lean' and 'Six Sigma.' What do these practices entail and what companies can benefit from them?

NESTER: These are tools of continual improvement and have been around 40, 50, 60 years. Lean comes from a Toyota production system that looks at waste – in transportation, inventory, defects, how you utilize your people, processes – and how all these contribute to non-value added activities. Motorola coined the phrase Six Sigma in the 1980s but the concept has been around since the 1920s. Six Sigma quality means there will be three defects out of a million opportunities of making a product, which is 99.999997 percent quality. A regular process that is called under control is only at a 99.97 percent quality or three opportunities out of a thousand times that a mishap could happen. The closer you get to the three defects per million opportunities, the more investment it takes. Some processes you do not need that kind of quality. It's up to the organization to determine how far they want to take their Sigma level.

PBN: Data from the state labor department show manufacturing has lost nearly 44,000 jobs in the last 15 years. Can Rhode Island compete based on these numbers?

NESTER: From my experience, as a manager at Hoechst North America, we had never exported our products. We began to implement the concept of Six Sigma, lean and continual improvement and began to export to the largest dye house in the world in China. It can be done. You need the continual improvement concepts and philosophies in place to succeed. The big cost to any companies overseas is they still have to get their products over the pond. This is where, if you get your process optimized, you can compete with just about anyone.

PBN: What can Rhode Island do to ensure manufacturing opportunities remain here?

NESTER: The state has good intentions but they have to know what to do first. You have to get at the root cause. Nothing will fix everything, but the WorkPlace Skills Applied Learning Program would fix many of the woes in the education system in Rhode Island. All we ask is to give us a chance.

Published 10/08/2005
Issue 20-26