

LEAN TRAINING LEADS TO WAVES OF POSITIVE CHANGE FOR FITNESS EQUIPMENT MANUFACTURER

ABOUT WATERROWER INC. True to its name, the WaterRower machine simulates the natural dynamics of a boat moving through water. Its unique WaterFlywheel design generates a smooth, even stroke that captures the true aesthetics of on-water rowing. Each piece is stylishly designed to create a beautiful fitness furniture centerpiece. Founded in 1988, the company's manufacturing headquarters moved to Warren, Rhode Island, in 1996. This facility currently employs more than 130 employees.

THE CHALLENGE. Through steady growth for several decades, the company had handled some unusual peaks in demand, such as after a WaterRower was featured in popular Netflix series. Then came the COVID-19 pandemic. Sharp increases in sales of the easy-to-use at-home fitness equipment rolled in at the same time as waves of supply chain issues and worker shortages.

At the peak of the pandemic, with the influx of new workers and to keep up with increased global demand, the focus was to train quick and maximize production. Unfortunately, this is when inefficiencies crept in. There was a lot of wasteful moving; workers bounced back and forth to get specialized tools and materials needed for production, and product frequently went from the woodshop to the main floor and then back to the woodshop for rework. "To stay ahead of the competitors, to move forward, you have to move ahead," said Jill Lancaster, Director of HR, Administration & Finance for WaterRower. Lancaster and WaterRower CEO, Peter King, heard about Polaris MEP, part of the MEP National Network™, from another Warren manufacturer, Taylor Box Company. Based on the recommendation, company leaders turned to the MEP Center to help them establish a common language for continuous improvement.

MEP CENTER'S ROLE. The manufacturer first dipped its toe in the lean manufacturing waters by putting eight internal champions through an Introduction to Lean Principles workshop in February of 2021. Classes were hybrid due to COVID. Seeing immediate success, WaterRower invested in on-site training for an additional 10 employees in June.

WaterRower met the exceptional demand for their machines during the pandemic and made improvements that will drive growth in coming years. Work cells were adjusted based on team feedback. Engineering set up tool airdrops to reduce steps. Shipping established new systems for triggering re-orders. The team installed dashboards in every department to improve communications and accountability. They formed multiple huddle groups that got staffers working across siloes to understand how each department affected the others. "We've gone from a blame game to a solutions-oriented mindset," said Lancaster. "They can see how everything is entwined and they can be part of fixing it."

"With lean training from Polaris MEP, we've been able to implement improvements not just work to keep our heads above water to meet the demand."

-Jill Lancaster, Director of HR, Administration & Finance

RESULTS



2 jobs added



\$1,000,000 in retained sales



\$510,000 invested in new processes and employee skills



\$110,000 invested in plant, equipment, and information systems



\$10,000 in savings

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