



Building your Lean team

These analytical tools can help nurseries reach the next level of efficiency

BY CURT KIPP

LAST MAY, *DIGGER* PRESENTED the Efficiency Issue. We examined ways in which Oregon nurseries are making their operations more efficient, and we showed examples. Each nursery is unique. Our goal was to show off the ingenuity of some growers and inspire others to consider what they can do to make things better.

One year later, we are pleased to present the Lean Issue of *Digger*. This isn't efficiency in general. It is more specific.

We will take you inside the Lean methodologies nurseries are using to achieve greater efficiency and profitability, in the face of rising labor costs, worker shortages and tighter margins. It's about using certain analytical tools to see waste and unlock opportunities that otherwise might be invisible.

To engage in Lean requires intent, as well as investment of time, bandwidth and money. It's a much bigger investment than reading a set of articles in a magazine. However, we hope that growers will consider what is possible with these tools and do their own further exploration.

What is Lean, aka the Toyota Production System? It's a methodology Toyota innovated that allowed them to get more from their production investment, gain a marketplace edge, and increase profitability. Although Toyota makes motor vehicles, Lean is transferable to other contexts, including nurseries. There are many applications, even though nursery products aren't cars — they're living things.

The list of Oregon nurseries engaged in Lean is growing longer every year. Oregon has a Lean consortium where the participating nurseries help each other improve. Other nurseries go it alone, hiring consultants or bringing expertise onto their staffs so they can go through the process of eliminating waste and enhanc-

ing product value.

John Lewis, owner of liner grower **JLPN Inc.**, said that Lean typically fails or succeeds from the top of a company. Others have agreed: ownership must be on board.

"If I wasn't 110 percent into it, how could I expect anyone to follow my lead?" he said.

But at the same time, employees are just as crucial to the process.

"My single most gratifying benefit from implementing Lean, personally, has been the connections I have made with my crew," Lewis said. "Lean doesn't work by telling somebody to go do it. The head of the company and the youngest team member are all equal. In Lean, you work as a team, not a hierarchy."

And you succeed as a team.

"When we implement ideas and they work, people get excited," said Carlos Vergara, Lean manager at JLPN.

For Lewis, sometimes it involves letting go of decisions personally and letting the team have more control. Changes need not be permanent if they don't work.

"If it's wrong," he said, "we made the decision together."

Over the next several pages, we will introduce you to several Lean concepts. One is telling value from waste. A second is locking efficient processes in place by creating what is called "standard work." A third is organizing the work space to make it more efficient, through use of what's called a "5S program." And finally, we will look at the concept of continuous flow, which boosts production by setting a pace for the work that needs to be done.

We hope you will find this information useful as you consider adopting Lean at your company. ☺