



Part 2

Creating 'standard work'

Finding and reinforcing best work flows helps nurseries run a tighter ship

BY JON BELL

WALK INTO JLPN INC., a seeding operation and nursery in Salem, Oregon, and even if you're not familiar with how to harvest or grade container seedlings, you'd soon be doing it like an experienced hand.

How? Simply by looking at the laminated diagrams that JLPN has on hand. They show just how everything needs to be done and how it all needs to be laid out, both in design, process and quality standards.

"Anybody with no prior knowledge could take our standard work form and know exactly how to set up our grading process," said John Lewis, owner of the Salem, Oregon-based propagation nursery. "We follow the standard work because we have documented reality and proven that this is the least wasteful way of doing the process."

That term that Lewis used twice — standard work — is one of the key concepts of Lean. It is the idea that, once the most efficient and effective process has been determined for producing a particular product or outcome, that process is documented in detail so that it is followed consistently and can be passed from team member to team member with ease.

It ensures that there is some standardization and that institutional knowledge doesn't drain out of a business when employees leave.

It also is a concept that, combined with the other principles of Lean, can help contribute to the overall benefits that nurseries realize

when operating in the Lean way.

"The biggest benefits of lean are saving time, saving money and ending up with happier employees," said Jessica Lowden, supply chain manager at **Al's Garden and Home** in Portland. "Lean and continuous flow (another Lean principle) give employees processes that don't feel like they are spending time wasting time."

Starting point

At its most basic, the Lean concept of standard work is simply defining the most efficient method to accomplish a task or produce a product and then following that method without deviation. It breaks down the methods into detailed, manageable steps that eliminate waste and ensure that every employee is essentially working on the process in the exact same way.

For Lewis, one of the most effective examples has been bringing standard work through the laminated diagrams to JLPN's to its process for harvesting and grading container seedlings. Prior to implementing Lean — including continuous flow or improvement, which focuses on moving a single unit through each step of the manufacturing process from beginning to end, rather than multiple units at a time — Lewis said JLPN had much less uniformity in its products and processes. Bringing in standard work helped tighten the ship.

"Before we had continuous flow and standard work measures in place ... every crew might set up a planting, or grading pro- ➤

Lean: Creating 'standards work'

Previous page: Top left: Humberto Sevilla (left) and Anwar Alkhalifah (right) of Kraemer's Nursery worked with a team that created an improved method for assembling and storing shipping racks. PHOTO COURTESY OF THE PETERS COMPANY Top right: Carlos Vergara, Lean manager at JLPN, holds a laminated procedure sign. PHOTO BY BILL GOLOSKI Bottom: JLPN staff work on a cutting and grading process. PHOTO COURTESY OF JLPN

cess a different way, with a different layout, more or less crew, or equipment, based on who was available," he said. "With standard work, they know how many crew, tractors, machines, and tools are needed to complete every job."

At Al's, Lowden said the company started its Lean initiatives in 2018, including implementing standard work for its entire receiving team.

"We have a manual, visual guides, and most importantly, we are all thinking Lean," she said.

Lowden also said that having standard work in place allows Al's to train new employees with ease. It's also reduced the number of times management needs to intervene on a process because employees can now find the answers themselves.

Before implementing Lean, Lowden said Al's had one work station where a group of

people would work on one product. The team included an unboxer, a computer person, a paper person, a tagger and someone who would then put the product away.

"We have five different people touching one product," she said.

With Lean, however, those same five people are now working on a different product all at the same time.

"We increased the number of work stations and the layout of our department so that the product comes in one door and goes out another door with only two touches instead of five," Lowden said. "We reduced the time it takes to process one product by 50 percent."

Another example of standard work at Al's has been the installation of visual cues in the grow houses and identifying more direct paths for pickers to pull orders from the greenhouses and stage them on racks.

Constant evolution

One thing about standard work is that, even though it documents the way a process should work, it's not entirely static. Anytime an improvement can be made to make a process more efficient, the standard gets updated.

"After we make an improvement and go forward with that as a new standard, we work with the crews to make sure they are trained and up to speed," said Tristan Wampole, continuous improvement manager at Kraemer's Nursery in Mt. Angel, Oregon. "The process is an example of continuous flow, but we have standard work to show everyone how it's supposed to work."

As with other Lean principles, standard work can sometimes be difficult to get employees to adopt. Wampole said it's harder to get longtime employees to change the way they do things, especially if they've been doing them a certain way for many years. Lowden has experienced that as well.

"I have found that as a natural instinct most people shy away from change," she said. "As a manager, I talk about change in a positive way. A way that gets my employees excited that they will be learning something new. Being the leader of the group I know that my energy will fuel their work and remaining positive and encouraging is the best way get a team on the path to success."

What Lewis calls "tribal knowledge" — the idea that everyone just knows what to do or how it's done — can be the "kryptonite of adhering to standard work," he said. But there are ways to avoid that.

"Training your crew, being consistent, and having them see the value that standard work creates, is one of the best ways to keep production going in the right direction," Lewis said.

He and others also said that standard work and all the other components of Lean will always be evolving and improving their operations. There will always be places to improve, waste to cut and efficiencies to gain.

"I think Lean is a lifestyle for a business," Lowden said. "Once you begin to use Lean techniques, there is no going back and there is no standing still. You are constantly evaluating some aspect of the business to make sure that it is running as cost efficiently and effectively as possible." ©



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