

For Immediate Release:
May 27, 2004

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Innovative Techniques Means Local Company Doesn't Have to "Chace" the Competition

FALL RIVER, MA - In today's global marketplace, small and medium sized manufacturing companies have to constantly adapt the way they do business in order to survive against under priced overseas competition.

Chace Leather Products has been manufacturing high quality leather and synthetic fabric products in Fall River, Massachusetts for nearly a century, but competition from imported products has recently begun to cut into the company's bottom line. Faced with a 25 percent reduction in business over the past five years, Chace's management recognized the company needed to be innovative.

"For four generations the Chace Family's philosophy has been 'Total Customer Satisfaction' and we knew that by targeting specialty segments of our industry that required increased service and speed to market we could separate ourselves from the competition," said Larry Walsh, Chace Leather Products president and CEO. "To do this we had to focus on ways to improve the on-time-delivery performance."

During a training program at the UMass Dartmouth Fall River campus, Stephen Chace, Chace's Vice President of Operations was introduced to the Massachusetts Manufacturing Extension Partnership (MassMEP), a resource that provides business and technical assistance to smaller manufacturers. MassMEP representatives proposed a Lean Pilot project to address Chace's needs, specifically focusing on the company's line of hard cases for heavy duty uses and the product line for Motorola one of its largest clients.

Lean Manufacturing is an implementation technique that utilizes simple but effective methods that identify and reduce waste, and inventories, clear shop floors and streamline production processes all with a goal of decreasing costs and increasing productivity.

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"We used lean techniques like Value Stream Mapping to assess the cycle time between each manufacturing step to find ways to make the most efficient use of time and other techniques to help organize the workplace," said Rick Bowie, MassMEP Project Manager. "As a result, the lead time was cut from weeks to a matter of days and Chace has achieved 100 percent on-time delivery for Motorola."

The improved performance has enabled Chace to develop a delivery program that increased business opportunities with Motorola's German manufacturing facility. Chace was informed that it now out performs all of the competition, including competitors from India and other foreign countries. The company has shared this experience with Motorola, USA and all their major customers.

"The experience of that first day of Lean workshops was unbelievable," said Walsh. "The members of our team that attended the class came back to work energized and focused on quickly implementing improvements. We were able to accomplish much more than I expected in less than six weeks and the performance changes have been truly remarkable."

The MassMEP is an affiliate of the National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST) under the U.S. Department of Commerce. The national MEP system is a network of manufacturing extension centers that provide business and technical assistance to smaller manufacturers in all 50 states, the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico. Through MEP, manufacturers have access to more than 2,000 manufacturing and business "coaches" whose job is to help firms make changes that lead to greater productivity, increased profits and enhanced global competitiveness. For more information, please visit www.massmep.org, and click on the New England Manufacturing Supply Chain link, or phone 508-831-7020.

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