



Rechtsgewinde

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The Constant Hit

In 1995, in an effort to stave off a crisis, managing director Stefan Liebe introduced lean methods in the production operations of the Askubal ball-bearings factory with the assistance of Porsche Consulting.

It proved to be a successful move. Today the entire company is run in accordance with the rules of lean management. There is still contact with the Porsche consultants, and Liebe has stuck with the lean route because he is firmly convinced that he is on the right track.

[📄] Reiner Schloz [📷] Porsche





Pivot head with housing – the different sizes and quantities can be produced in real time and finished for the customer

There's no room for pretty pictures in the boss's office. The large wall is reserved for tables and charts showing the necessary key performance indicators and charts, and the quality gates and target agreements which have been derived from them. They are all neatly arranged and marked in color. The everyday working life of a company is mapped out here like a management work of art. Stefan Liebe, managing director of the ASK ball-bearings manufacturer Artur Seyfert GmbH (Askubal) in Korntal-Münchingen near Stuttgart, keeps an eye on everything. Transparency is one of his secrets to success. "As a supplier," he says with pride, "we have never received anything but 'A' ratings."

Such top ratings prove that he is right. They also demonstrate that adopting the principles of lean management loses none of its impact, even when viewed over the long term. Askubal is one of the longest-standing and most loyal clients of Porsche Consulting. For fourteen years now, the company has been working to reduce waste and focus consistently on creating added value. Right from day one, Stefan Liebe made it his priority ensure that the methods

were implemented and followed, and that they were introduced in all areas of the business. "We completely changed our philosophy," he says.

Askubal is able to produce whatever the customer wants within twenty-four hours. Levels of stock are reduced to a minimum. "We can now handle twice the volume of sales that we were previously able to, with the same infrastructure," says Liebe. And, just as importantly, the working atmosphere has also continued to improve.

At the start of the 1990s, the situation was not so positive. Business was just about sufficient for the company to break even. Production operations were sluggish and inflexible, and huge levels of stock took up far too much space. This was what prompted Stefan Liebe to ask his production experts to come up with some new ideas. It was suggested that robots be purchased or conveyor belts be introduced – these ideas would have required investments of around three million Deutschmarks. "But we didn't have the money, so ▶



Plan, measure, tidy up: Stefan Liebe (top, left) is very happy with the results of the Kaizen workshops at Askubal



Settled manufacturing: Production control is today based continuously on the so-called pull principle

we had to come up with something entirely different,” says Liebe.

The Askubal boss began to look at KAIZEN. It was ultimately a talk by Michael Macht that tipped the balance. The then head of Porsche Consulting, who today is the Executive Board member responsible for production and logistics at Porsche AG, explained how they had completely straightened out the assembly operation at Porsche and had turned it on its head. Liebe called in consultants from the automotive industry to help his company. The first workshop took place in June 1995. The consultants rolled up their sleeves and immediately they looked at the main focal point of production operations: the set-up time of the Schütte multi-spindle automatic lathe, where the basic housings for the rod ends were produced, urgently needed to be reduced. The batch sizes, which were thought to be economical, were the root cause of all the problems, because they resulted in high levels of stock and long lead times for the material. The background to this was that, because of the changeover times of 720 minutes stored in the system, the IT system would suggest that production batches for stock availability of up to two years be produced. The result was that the machine was set quite infrequently, and a great quantity of one variant was produced.

The intention was that reducing set-up times and batch sizes should massively reduce lead times. Focusing on the set-up process revealed that the actual changeover process did not take 540 minutes, but in fact only 305 minutes. The zero line which the Porsche consultants and the experts from Askubal could use as a benchmark was thus established. Within a week, the changeover process (from one good component to another) was reduced to 172 minutes. Further optimization steps enabled this figure to be reduced to 145 minutes, and this is still the figure today. The corresponding adjustment to batch sizes resulted in a significant reduction in lead time, which allows Askubal to respond much more flexibly to its customers' needs. The

mountains of stock behind the Schütte machine, which had once symbolized the level of waste, shrank too.

Stefan Liebe quickly began to realize something: “If you want to make really effective use of the method, you need to optimize all areas.” Working together with Porsche Consulting, areas including order management, processing and the flow path in production were modified very quickly. Nine workshops were held the first year, including the training given to all employees – and they had far-reaching consequences. Askubal had completely refocused within the span of one year.

The boss of the company is only too happy today to concede that things did not always run smoothly, since the changes were so drastic. First there was the understandable resistance from employees who feared that the appearance of the consultants on the scene would mean job cuts. Liebe calmed these fears by guaranteeing that there would be no redundancies in relation to KAIZEN measures. And then there were the senior managers who, in a company which until then had been run on a strictly hierarchical basis, suddenly found themselves thrust into the role of a coach and moderator and were also forced to listen to their staff. Ultimately, the intention was that employees should take on more individual responsibility for their own jobs, make their own suggestions for improvements, and implement them too. Experimentation was allowed. The culture at the company was suddenly different. “The middle level of management in particular had to change considerably,” says Liebe. Not everybody was able to handle this.

Field service staff were also called on to make adjustments. They were asked to travel fewer kilometers and make more visits to customers. The way that routes were planned was thoroughly overhauled. This was not just a question of saving petrol money. “If you spend 1500 hours a year sitting in your car just to ensure that you can sleep in your own bed every night,” says Liebe, “you cannot ▶



Job done: The Kaizen experts from Porsche Consulting and Askubal and the Rhodesian Ridgeback Pan after a successful workshop

be with customers during this time.” The agreed target is now 20,000 kilometers a year and field service staff should now have much more contact with customers. Before this, 50,000 kilometers a year was not uncommon.

The changes run through all areas of the company. By mid-2006, a total of 38 internal workshops had taken place at Askubal. Even today, every new employee has to undergo KAIZEN training which the boss himself usually delivers. Stefan Liebe has compiled key performance indicators for quality, costs, delivery service, motivation and the environment because lean management “cannot be illustrated vividly enough using just straight economic KPIs”. In addition, he has developed a dedicated system for assessing the improvements generated by the workforce, from which he has devised a points system which is also used to reward the active employees. In 2007, 160 improvements which were the brainchildren of the company’s own employees were implemented.

Throughout the company you will find charts and standardized operating instructions. This visualization creates transparency. Even customer complaints are displayed openly. “Ultimately, it is all about continuing to reduce them,” says Liebe. To ensure that the improvement process does not slacken off, Askubal holds a workshop with the consultants from Porsche Consulting once a year. “You should never relinquish the opportunity to get an external perspective and new ideas,” says the boss of the company with real conviction.

After fourteen years’ experience of working with Porsche Consulting, Stefan Liebe can deliver a wholly positive verdict on the relationship. Two things are very important to mention here: “First, lean management can only work if the management of a company make it a top priority and consistently pursue it with vigor. And second, a company that opts to go down the lean route will over time become a completely different company.” ◀



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