

Waste Eradication Culture Starts with a Toilet Seat: A Conversation with Paul Akers

by Dianna Brodine

*When Paul Akers steps to the podium as a keynote speaker at MAPP's Annual Benchmarking & Best Practices Conference on October 11th, attendees will be prepared to begin a conversation about waste eradication and lean manufacturing. They might not expect the conversation to start with a bathroom – after six years of writing and editing *Plastics Business*, that's certainly not what I anticipated. But Akers isn't what you might expect, and that's what gives his message impact.*

To conduct our interview for this article, Akers and I video conferenced via Skype from his hotel in Phoenix, where he was presenting to one of the largest construction companies in the world. The emails we exchanged prior to the interview often contained a voice file, rather than a typed message. A quick internet search revealed a multitude of videos, including one posted in early August that listed eight 'deadly sins of waste' found at a food vendor's stand while Akers was attending an Oshkosh, WI Air Show. Akers wants to connect with people in a tangible way, whether a one-on-one interview or via a YouTube video – he wants to share his message of waste eradication in a way that is relatable. Most of all, he wants to teach you to see waste in everyday activities, just as he does.

Akers claims he came out of the womb wanting to make his living in manufacturing. At an early age, he had a lawn mowing business, and he believes he was the most productive, organized and thoughtful nine-year-old lawn mower on the block. As a teen, he worked with Bob Taylor building more than 2,000 world-class guitars. From there, he began restoring beautiful historic homes, building furniture and designing custom cabinetry.

"I had a pretty rich background in manufacturing," Akers explained. "I was good at what I did, respected for what I did, sought after for what I did. In other words, I knew what I was doing! Then I started FastCap and began to apply those skills to developing workworking equipment." Soon after opening the company, Akers hired a consultant. You can imagine the surprise when the consultant told Akers he was doing it all wrong. That's when Akers' lean journey began.

Applying the Toyota Production System at FastCap

FastCap is a 50-employee product development company that specializes in equipment for the woodworking industry. A wide variety of machinery is on hand to meet production needs, including rapid prototyping, CNC, injection molding, printing, diecutting, aluminum fabrication, welding and a full cabinet shop. Many of the employees are cross-trained, with skills in up to ten different areas.

While the company prides itself on its waste eradication culture now, the early years were eerily similar to what many MAPP Members have experienced: inefficiencies in the manufacturing process were holding the company back.

"The biggest thing was batch work," said Akers. "A customer would order 10,000 FastCaps a day, and we would make 100,000 pieces because it was easier. Then when the order came in, we would bill it out. In the meantime, we had all of this inventory and no one to sell it to." When challenged as to the reason

for the excessive production, the answer was another common manufacturing concern – laborious and time-consuming changeover for dies and molds. The consultant stepped in and a process that was taking 45 minutes was suddenly taking five minutes. The light bulb turned on for Akers. “I realized there were faster ways to do everything,” he explained. “They taught me how to see waste, and the problem is that most people don’t see it. It’s about changing your mind to see things differently.”

Akers now can see waste in even everyday situations, as evidenced by the video explanation of waste at the food vendor stand. Seeing waste, however, is only the first step. “We are filled with waste,” Akers explained, waving his hands for emphasis. “I am filled with waste. I’m the expert, and I am a waste monger.”

He said, “Yesterday, I was with Turner Construction. I woke up at 4:30 a.m., worked out and got to a meeting around 6:30 or 6:45. I spoke at that meeting, I walked around the plant and I gave the company ideas of how to eliminate waste. Look at that day! I told them, ‘If we’re lucky, the value-added aspect was maybe an hour and a half.’” Akers explained, “At that point, I had been up for eight hours and I had delivered an hour and a half of value-added time. And I travel around the world teaching this!”

Building a Waste Eradication Culture

So, if the expert admits that he has a problem acting on his own waste eradication principles, what must be involved in building an entire manufacturing culture around them? Akers believes that the responsibility begins at the top, and involves an investment of both time and money. “I only have one job as the CEO of my company: to teach and train my people to continuously improve. The priority of my company is that my people understand lean, can see waste and are implementing improvements on a daily basis before they ever start work. They can’t do that if I don’t invest the money and the time required to teach them well.” To ensure that training is consistent, FastCap employees attend a one-hour FastCap University each morning before production begins. “If lean is important, we do it before we work,” said Akers. “We are training people how to function effectively.”

At the heart of FastCap’s waste eradication culture is one concept that Akers pirated from a very close friend. The friend was able to boil waste eradication down to one statement: Fix what bugs you. “Every day, our employees are required to make one improvement – one thing that improves the job environment or the production process. If they’re having a hard time making an improvement for the day, I say, ‘what bugs you?’ It’s part of teaching them to reason and think. It’s teaching them to find the things that bug them and eliminate the waste.”

He continued, “Lean is so amazing – such a critical piece to how we do business. The problem is nobody wants to do it! If people would do it, they would say, ‘Oh, my gosh, this is easy!’” Making what was obviously a rookie mistake, I asked Akers how he gets his employees to buy into the waste reduction philosophy if no one wants to take on the responsibility.

Akers laughed and shook his head. “No! No! You’re asking the wrong question!,” he said. “It’s not about getting them to buy in. Waste reduction is their *job*. It is mandatory. It is not something I ‘want’ – it’s their *job*. That is the purpose of our company. That is the key difference in what we do at FastCap.”

Making a Toilet Seat the Center of Lean

At FastCap, Akers believes that improving quality and eliminating waste only can happen once a culture has been established in which employees understand how to see waste in every situation. “If you’re not eliminating waste, you’re not doing lean,” he explained. “That is the tenant of lean. The question is *how* do you eliminate waste? That’s where the disconnect happens.”

So Akers started with the obvious choice. “There’s only one place to start the lean journey,” he exclaimed, “and it’s the bathroom!” Akers and the team began by asking key questions, such as: Is it organized? Is there clear process control? Is it a sparkling place, and is it highly functional? Is it efficient?

“It took a month and a half to roll out our bathroom,” said Akers. The team took everything out of the bathroom and decided which cleaning supplies were truly needed. Then a standard was creating for how to clean the bathroom, with all supplies and storage areas labeled. Kanbans were created for everything. “The bathroom is the one area of our company that everyone visits at least once a day. If we can’t be lean in the bathroom, I can’t expect the rest of the company to be lean,” he explained. And the reaction has been overwhelmingly positive, according to Akers. “Everyone agreed that this was really cool! We have \$500 toilet seats – the best there are! We want our employees to have the best of everything. And if they have the best of everything in the bathroom, and the space is highly organized and efficient, then they know we expect the same standards everywhere.”

I asked Akers about the impact of the waste eradication culture at FastCap, expecting a quantifiable number, a benchmark or a ‘before and after’. Akers delights in confounding expectations. “The only thing that really matters to me is that my people are happy,” he said. “We make great money, everyone raves about us, we’re revered in the industry and we haven’t raised our prices in six years. It’s nice, but none of it matters. The only thing that matters is that I’m happy to see my people, and they’re happy to see me.”

Fixing the things that bug the people who work at FastCap has made for a positive, productive working environment, which led to successful manufacturing years despite a struggling national economy. “The way you improve quality is through the elimination of waste,” said Akers. “And the way you do those two things – improve quality and eliminate waste – is to develop a culture where people can see waste.”

In the end, Akers reminded me, “You don’t become lean. It’s a lifetime journey.”

Paul Akers will discuss the lifetime journey to lean at the MAPP Benchmarking & Best Practices Conference in Indianapolis, IN, October 11-12. Follow the QR code to see Akers’ two-minute video on the 8 Deadly Sins of Waste encountered at a recent air show, or visit www.paulakers.com to see more of Akers’ videos.

8 deadly sins of waste <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hOQbE6wlg1g&feature=relmfu>