

Stephanie Acri: Doing What Interests Her Extraordinarily

After spending more than a decade in the corporate world, practicing her trade as a mechanical engineer, Stephanie Acri began looking around at manufacturing companies to fulfill a long-held desire. “I had saved an inheritance from my grandmother to buy an existing company, said Stephanie. “I needed a funky size; not too big to make it unaffordable and also too small for a large corporation.” There is a quiet charm and intelligence about her. As she relays the story of how she started her woman-owned business, Stephanie moves quickly through the chain of events.

It’s almost as if she has a sense of urgency to get on with the present. Nevertheless, her story begins after graduating from the University of Iowa, when she began her career at Alcoa, Inc., Riverdale, Iowa. There she worked and learned. Alcoa retiree, Dick Lager, who would eventually work for her as a driver, never met her while they were both at Alcoa but he’d heard about her. Dick said, “She’s a good engineer, and was pretty well-known at Alcoa. Whatever job she was on, she was always in the field.”

In 2004, Stephanie found the perfect fit in Evans Manufacturing, Rock Island, Ill., a company that specializes in the manufacturing of cylindrical parts used by the agricultural, construction, automotive and other industries. The owner was ready to retire, and she saw an opportunity for growth. Stephanie then approached Blackhawk State Bank, the City of Rock Island and Bi-State Regional Commission, the area’s metropolitan planning authority, to put together a package deal.

“How would you forget her?” remembers Donna Moritz, responsible for Bi-State’s revolving loan program. “She’s very impressive.” It was apparent to Donna that Stephanie had done her homework and knew exactly what she was getting into. “I remember when she presented to our board of directors,” said Mary Chappell, City of Rock Island. “When she walked into the room, they didn’t quite know what to think. But she wowed them.” Mary administers the City’s revolving loan fund, and continues to work with Stephanie when she calls upon them for assistance.

She had begun.

Recognizing the value of her workforce, Stephanie quickly converted temp employees to permanent status, and, thereafter, new employees were brought in only on permanent hire status. By doing so, everyone is more engaged and working cooperatively together both from the viewpoint of the new hire and the veteran employee. Dick remembers when he met Stephanie, “I had heard that she needed a driver, so I stopped in to talk with her. As soon as I mentioned that I retired from Alcoa, she got a gleam in her eye.”

Getting deliveries to her customers on time was then and continues to be a high priority. While employed for the company, Dick was on call 24/7. "She would call me with the details, and I would go." Another, more immediate, change was moving to a six-day, three-shift operation, a change greeted favorably by the existing workforce. The company had previously operated on two 10-hour shifts. Stephanie explains, "First shift is the most attractive certainly, then third, and finally second. By going to shorter 8-hour work days, more family and personal time becomes available."

She also converted the structure to a very flat organization. Owner and general manager Stephanie has managers who oversee functions for shipping / quality, purchasing / ISO, production and accounting / office and estimating / IT. Customer service and process improvement is everyone's responsibility, and is spread across the entire company. A production meeting is held every day so everyone knows what's going on. It also provides an opportunity to address problems and discuss issues.

With annual revenue of more than \$5 million, Evans Manufacturing has grown four-fold over the last four years, since Stephanie took over the company in 2004. In addition to growing the workforce to 60 employees and making structural changes, Stephanie invested extensively in new and upgraded equipment. She also contacted the Northwest Regional Entrepreneurship Center to secure a matching grant to fund a Kaizen workshop.

A Kaizen workshop is founded on the Toyota Production System, which aims to design out overburden, inconsistency and waste elimination. She notes it's more commonly referred to as 'Lean manufacturing,' a generic process system derived from the Toyota System. Nevertheless, Stephanie acknowledges that unless you are exposed to it in the corporate world, it is difficult to find on your own.

As Stephanie verified spelling for several production theories she's introduced at Evans Manufacturing, she explained their meaning in simple terms:

Kaizen: "It means continuous improvement in Japanese. The 'Zen' part of the word means 'good.' A Kaizen workshop is when you go into a shop with a lot of resources and come out in a short period of time with a rapid solution."

Kanban: "It is a replenishment tool or pull system. So when you use up a pencil, something is already in place to have a new pencil there ready for you. Or maybe there is a piece of paper that reminds you to order a new one before the old one is used up."

Pokayoke: "It means fail-safing or fool proofing. Say you have two pieces that need to go together. Well, one piece has a pin in it and the other piece has a hole, and there is only one way to put the two pieces together."

"We used the grant funds to help us with process improvement and set-up reductions," said Stephanie. The two-day Kaizen workshop focused on one

machine, with two Illinois Manufacturing Extension Center (IMEC) representatives and four Evans employees participating in the process. We took what we learned from that workshop, created a team, and applied it to other machines and equipment.”

During a plant tour, an easy familiarity is apparent between Stephanie, her manager, and the machinists. There is a synergy at work here. Programmer Chuck Pappas explained several examples on how the Kaizan team at Evans has changed how they operate. Results of the machine examined during the workshop revealed that the worker was spending considerable time traveling from the machine to a cabinet where parts were stored. So the team built a wooden cabinet that was positioned right next to the machine. This cut at least 10 minutes from the process.

Another machine uses colored-coded bar stock and tubes that match the work order. These assist the machinist in grabbing the items quickly, instead of finding tiny, corresponding serial numbers of the bar stock and tubes off of the worksheet. Jaw inserts are used interchangeably on another machine to keep the material from moving around the chuck. Use of the jaw inserts versus use of full jaws that requires changing the entire assembly cut set-up time by 12 minutes.

“This one I’m the most proud of,” said Chuck about a fourth machine. “We built these boxes to hold these parts, and positioned the boxes at the fingertips of the machine operator. It was an organizing thing.” During the workshop for this machine, they learned that the machine operator would be far more likely to put away the part than to not put it away.

So high is the enthusiasm at Evans Manufacturing to improve that Deb Nelson, performance improvement manager, just introduced an employee suggestion program. A committee reviews submitted ideas for improvement; these ideas must also provide solutions. In the two months since the program was introduced, several ideas have been implemented including, a tools tracking system, a sander relocated to another department, and a machining change that increased units cycling by 50 units per hour.

For her support system, Stephanie looks to childhood friends, a sister in Alaska, and her three children, Tim, 14; Joey, 13; and McClain, 9. A quick smile comes as she talks about them. She also gains energy from the community through her involvement with them, such as Workforce Development, Illinois Quad City Chamber of Commerce and Trinity Medical Center where she serves as a board member. Her company and those who work alongside her give support as well. “Besides, I get to do the things that are interesting to me.”

“There is an innocence about her. She doesn’t know that she’s out of the ordinary,” said one of her many admirers.