

Photos by David R. Lutman, Special to The Courier-Journal

David Veech, of The Institute for Lean Systems, asked managers of Rev-A-Shelf, a Louisville cabinet hardware and accessories manufacturer, to think through the Toyota process at a recent workshop.

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enterprise strategy, said he decided after high school in his native Germany "that different cultures were an interesting field of study, so I became an anthropologist."

"Unfortunately," he said, "the job situation for anthropologists wasn't too good. Nobody was too keen on hiring people who would go out in the Pacific Ocean and spend a year with some group and then study their customs and report back."

Knuf eventually found work in academia — first at Ohio State University and then at UK. It turned out that the anthropologist's skills could be put to use studying human groups within the business world.

Looking at a client company, he has an outsider's perspective on "what makes it cohere, what sort of rules and relationships are in place that steer the organization."

"You're probably not going to see a lot of people like me doing this," Knuf said, though some large corporations are hiring anthropologists and "trying to figure out the little tribes inside the organization, how they all get along with one another. It's a burgeoning field of inquiry, but I've been doing this for well over 20 years."

Part of the Toyota way of management is to break through traditional roles that hinder teamwork and communication, he said.

In conventional companies, "information is an aspect of power. Power is something that people don't like to share from the more conventional thinking, so withholding information is an exercise of power and control."

For a lean company, "it's not about control and it's not about command," Knuf said. "You have to push the decision making down as much as you possibly can."

Workers must also have a sense of identity, Veech said. "People need to feel like they belong to something special. People need to connect with other people at work and have that strong sense of who we are together."

THE TOYOTA WAY

- ▶ Just-in-time delivery
- ▶ Teamwork, breaking down barriers
- ▶ Worker empowerment, encouraging thought about the process
- ▶ The strategy of kaizen (continuous improvement)

In addition, employees need "the feeling of doing something significant. Nobody wants to go to work every day and think they're just wasting time," he said.

ILS leads training and certification sessions for executives and management teams, and will also do intensive consultation and on-site work. One client is Wabash Plastics of Evansville, Ind., which chose ILS after reviewing a number of other consultants, said Ed Furniss, vice president and plant manager.

"I think they've provided a real valuable service," Furniss said. All the employees at the custom-injection moldings company have had 17 hours of basic training. Supervisors and the newly created "team leaders" have had 40 hours of training. Probably the most important result of the sessions is the involvement of employees "in continually looking for ways to improve and eliminate waste," he said. "I think we found a lot of ways of doing things better."

For ILS, "we define waste as any time you're waiting, any time you're not adding direct value to product," Veech said. Employee participation in that effort is crucial. "If we don't get everybody in the organization involved, then we'll never be able to improve to the point where we should be able to, because nobody knows the work better than the guys doing the work every single day."

Companies that look to lean systems for a few quick tips for increased efficiency are bound to be disappointed, Veech said. "If you ask Toyota, the Toyota production system doesn't just affect manufacturing operations, it affects everything they do. It's a permeating philosophy and the glue that holds the whole organization together."

The strong focus on employee satisfaction and em-



Veech talked with Mike Duncan, a Rev-A-Shelf section leader.

powerment can be a tough pill for some managers to swallow, but "once we give them a full dose of our overall philosophy, and how much of a positive impact they can have on it, most of them are very receptive to at least listening and trying," he said.

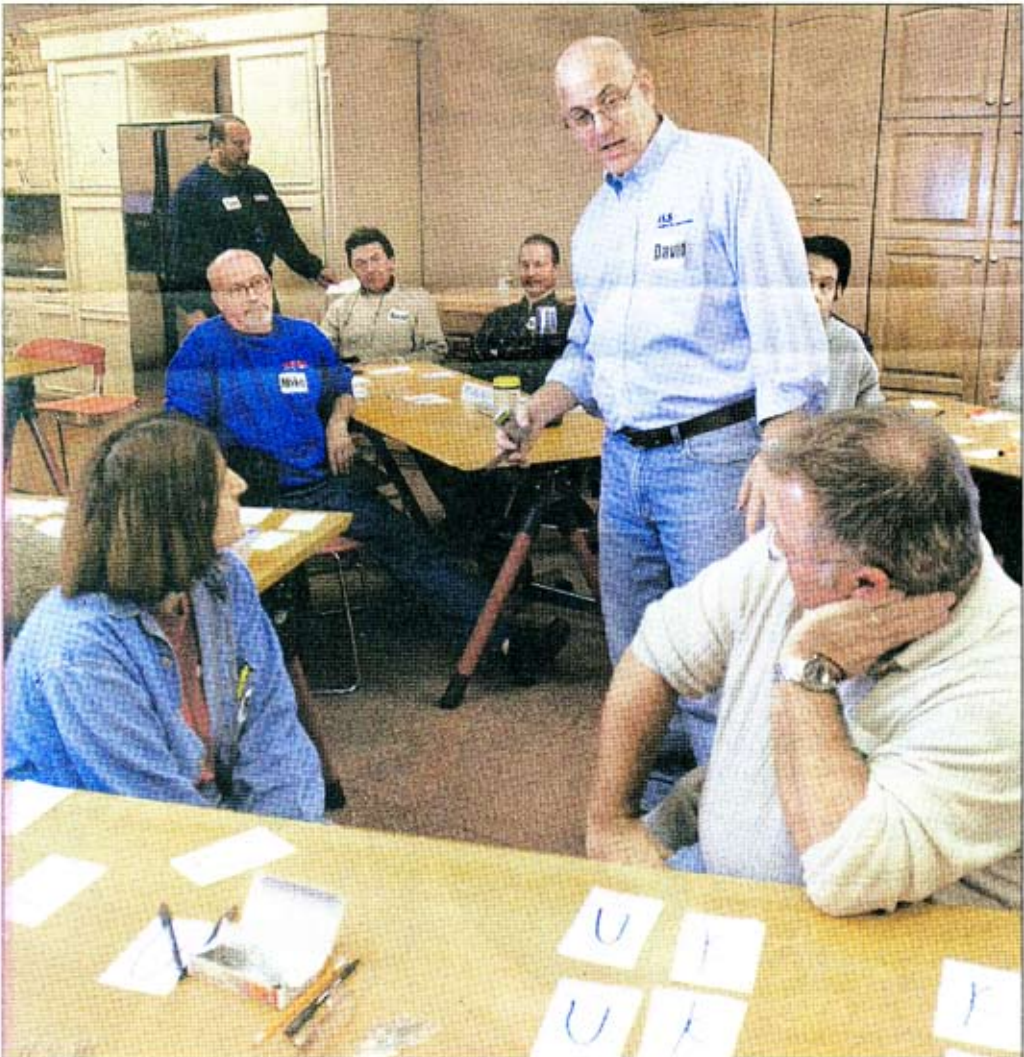
ILS is "in a growth mode right now," Veech said. "We have already brought on four subcontractors to help with some more intense on-site work. We have two more guys coming on full time."

Veech said he has taken steps to try to increase the company's local presence through steps such as working with Greater Louisville Inc., the metro chamber of commerce.

He has "this pretty optimistic vision" of helping companies create jobs that "make people want to come to work ... and then at the end of the day, you have to herd them out the door to get them to go home," Veech said.

"I've got the toolkit to be able to do that," he said. "I'd like to do more of that here in town rather than all over the world."

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Veech engaged in a question-and-answer session with Rev-A-Shelf section leader Radica Damnjanovic, left, and Tim Dennis, warehouse manager, at the company's plant in the Bluegrass Industrial Park.