

People skills

Commercial broker Chris McKee focuses on management



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Door to efficiency

La Puerta Originals finds success with LEAN manufacturing



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Opening the door to greater efficiency

BY LORINDA TOLEDO | SPECIAL TO NMBW

A peaceful, happy feeling overtakes you as you step into the showroom of La Puerta Originals.

The richly colored, solid doors and furniture have been handcrafted from wood salvaged throughout the world. Their original carvings are still intact, but after decades and even centuries of dilapidation, each panel of wood has had new life breathed into it.

From the warmth, beauty and history that radiates from each custom-made entry way, kitchen cabinet and entertainment center, it's easy to see why La Puerta Originals has grown so much since it was founded by architect Scott Coleman in 1992. Yet, fewer than two years ago, it was nearly hobbled by its own success.

"At that time, there was a lot of growth because the housing market was bubbling and full of cash and so we had lots of orders," said Trevor Ryan, La Puerta's operations manager. "But we were trying to figure out how to get all those orders out, maintain quality and keep our promise dates."

Even after moving to an 18,000 square-foot facility with nearly twice the space of its old one, La Puerta's designs were still running as long as 25 weeks from the time the architect sat down with a customer to the finished product.

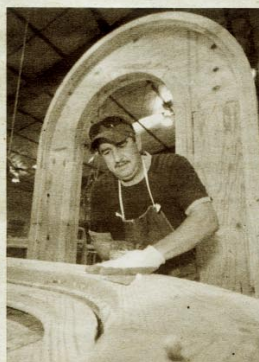
That's when Ryan and Melissa Coleman, La Puerta president and CEO, turned to the New Mexico Manufacturing Extension Partnership for help. The partnership is part of a national network that provides technical and business resources to manufacturers who want to expand their capabilities and increase profitability.

Ron Burke, senior project manager for the extension partnership, worked with La Puerta staff to implement LEAN-manufacturing procedures.

"What we try to do is help companies identify and eliminate non-value added activity," Burke said. "Anything that doesn't help them make the product."

Based on principles founded by Henry Ford and streamlined by Toyota, LEAN manufacturing eliminates unnecessary excess in the work force, down to figuring out how many movements employees need to make to accomplish a task.

La Puerta employees attended monthly workshops hosted by the extension partnership, learning through classroom lectures and manufacturing simulations. The company now maintains an on-



Melissa Coleman, left, president of La Puerta Originals in Santa Fe. Above, master wood craftsman Alvaro Castillo works on a custom door that will have a stained glass inlay when finished.

going relationship with the New Mexico Manufacturing Extension Partnership to continue implementing LEAN processes.

Burke said some LEAN companies use the partnership as training for their new employees, while other companies work like La Puerta. He declined to give figures for the cost of participation, but said the manufacturing extension partners with entities such as Sandia Labs that help finance the classes for small businesses.

Burke and his team analyzed La Puerta's processes through observations at the La Puerta site and in discussions with employees to determine what was really holding up the production process. The extension partnership attempts to bring in the appropriate experts to handle individual situations, whether in-house or from out of state.

"We had a consultant come from the North Carolina area from the wood working industry," Melissa Coleman said. "And he confirmed that we did not have our shop organized in the most efficient manner."

For example, Ryan said sometimes jobs were being assigned in the shop that had not yet received 100 percent approval from the client regarding the finish that would go on the wood. As a result, production would have to stop while client consent was obtained, and the projects would accumulate and take up space.

Instead of getting bogged down by working on many projects at a time, La Puerta began to focus on moving individual projects through

the shop as quickly as possible.

"We got together with the whole company and, with [Burke's] help, we mapped the process flow in order for the whole company and identified all the hang-ups we had and identified every situation with a different action plan," Ryan said.

Without so many works-in-progress taking up space, La Puerta was able to reorganize so craftsmen would be able to move more efficiently.

"People that buy our products don't need them, they want them," Melissa Coleman said. "We wanted to make the process more simple because it takes quite a bit of time and effort on the clients' part. So we wanted it to be enjoyable for them and helpful to us."

After smoothing out the manufacturing process, La Puerta and Burke shifted their focus to the front of the house, where paperwork for the customer had become time-consuming, if not redundant, Coleman said. By consolidating the paperwork, the experience became less time-consuming for both the client and the administrative staff.

Ryan estimated La Puerta's production speed has increased 30 to 40 percent since implementing LEAN practices. La Puerta has 50 employees throughout the company, and the workshop usually runs between 15 and 40 projects at a time depending on the size, Ryan said.

And LEAN has left its mark in other areas of the company, too.

"Our employee retention rate has really improved quite dramatically," Coleman said. "LEAN made me more aware of what needed to be done to increase the efficiency of our employees for the sake of morale as well by not continuing to make silly mistakes over and over again."

Vital Stats

Company name: La Puerta Originals
Owner: Melissa Coleman, President and CEO
Type of company: Design and manufacture of custom home accents and furniture
Year established: 1992
Number of employees: 50
Gross sales growth: Increases by about \$500,000 to \$1 million annually
Address: 4523 State Road, Hwy. 14, Santa Fe
Phone: (505) 984-8164
Email address: info@lapuertaoriginals.com

Strategies:

1. Implemented new manufacturing procedures to expedite the production process
2. Reorganized the work site for greater efficiency
3. Consolidated paperwork to eliminate redundancy and increase speed