



SCALE  
IDEAS &  
IMPACT

# A Manufacturing Leader in a Fix-it Role Scales a New Process, with Patience & Trust

## CASE CONTEXT

An experienced operations manager works to turn around a plant through lean processes and culture change. His sense of why and the long-range results allow him to find a sense of purpose in difficult work and be motivated to make needed progress.



MALE

Level: MANAGER OF MANAGERS

Industry: HEALTHCARE

## HIGH-PERFORMING LEADERS LEVERAGE NETWORKS TO DO 5 THINGS

Based on 20 years of research in more than 300 organizations, we know that the quality of your professional relationship play a significant role in your success. We have extended this research to describe the way high-performing leaders leverage their networks to: Innovate, Execute, Scale, Thrive and Adapt.



Kevin is chemical engineer, the first in his family to earn a college degree. Over the last 15 years, he's worked in technical and management roles for several companies and multiple manufacturing plants. Currently, he's a plant manager, overseeing 24/7 operations and 70 employees. "My role has been to transition us to a lean manufacturing environment so we can achieve our goals for the business and keep the plant open ... It's been a pretty tough role."

Kevin was brought in to change operations on the advice of a consultant who sold senior management on the benefits. "I was transferred into that role, ready to develop the culture and system over time; I realized the consultant over-promised and the changes were not communicated well to people. We started off on the wrong foot. It set us back 6-9 months, and we had to work to rebuild trust."

Coming in, Kevin was stuck in the middle: seen as management by the plant employees but expected to implement directives coming from above. "I'm in the middle. I tried to communicate both sides. I tried to listen to what's going on at the floor level, resolve it and knock down barriers." After a few months on the job, he thought, *we are doing this wrong*. He was clear about this for himself and voiced it to a trusted peer and his direct reports. Then, he presented his view to senior management. "Here are our barriers. What we've been doing isn't working ... We've got to listen to the people running the work. They have their hands on it. They know the process and will come up with solutions. If we lose their trust and engagement, there is nothing we can do to make this successful."

Kevin refocused and returned to the why of the change. "*People have to understand why we are doing this. If they don't understand it, they are not going to get too excited about it.*" Kevin started with his direct reports, talking about why lean was needed. "We talked about where we want to go. Yes, we want to get out of crisis, but what are you doing to drive continuous improvement and org change to keep this plant running? I needed to remind myself and get them engaged to help me transform the plant." He started talking about the value of lean, not just the specifics, on the plant floor and in meetings. He got a video made about the changes—and connected to the importance of the plant's success to many families and the local community. "Having that end goal in mind helps me stay positive, and I hope that carries down."

As a practical matter, Kevin knew he needed to work through influencers, some of whom had been working at the facility for 30 years. “They are most influential. Their power is they know the process better than anybody ... When you spend time on the floor and watch the process, you can see who they are. *They are the go-to, the people other folks refer to, I wonder what so-and-so thinks.*” A few employees were very resistant starting out; others were just skeptical and couldn’t see why they should change what they have been doing. “I respected them, respected their ideas, but wanted them to understand there may be better ideas than the status quo.” Over time, Kevin has spent more time with the persuadable people and less time with the resisters. “At some point, either they will go with the critical mass or get left behind ... By getting the rest of the pack, you swing things.”

In addition to direct conversations with influencers across shifts and roles, Kevin is trying a range of tactics to build capacity and culture needed for the lean processes to take hold. He has mixed up roles and groups and shifts, balancing personal preferences with the need to cross-train and break up silos and cliques. He simplified goals: “We had too many priorities; people spend too much time figuring out what to do rather than doing the work.” Simple activities—like ice cream socials—helped people to let down their work posture, be recognized and celebrate small victories.

Still, people have been hard to reach. The “show me” mentality is prevalent and Kevin is patient. “The proof is in the pudding ... You have to show them that it works.” For example, when he brought in a new scheduling process, “people were upset and resistant. After a couple months, it started working and it was a ton easier on them. They weren’t running around reacting. We got a lot more efficient ... Not long ago, something unexpected did happen, we fell off the schedule, it was tough. Folks were like, *Oh, if we can just get back to that good schedule!*”

For Kevin and his plant, the road to success is still rocky. But, he sees they are headed in the right direction. “I’m getting better relationships. People know the process and know I’m listening to them ... A lot of good people have been hidden and a lot of potential overlooked, and that is changing.”

## Network Insights

- **Focus on the *why* of change.** Be clear about the bigger picture and purpose. Communicate it at every level, consistently, to strengthen credibility and trust over time.
- **Don’t over-rely on formal structure to drive change.** Engage and educate informal influencers. If they are on board, they will bring others along.
- **Work across established boundaries.** Show up personally to communicate to and get input from all levels, all shifts, all functions. Get to know newcomers as well as people who have been at the company for years. Create work structures and off-task activities for others to connect across boundaries, too.
- **Be patient and respectful with resisters early on.** Encourage them to be open to possibilities beyond the status quo. All but the most entrenched will come around as the others engage, speak up and begin to get results.
- **Be authentic and stand for something larger than yourself.** This builds trust and energy in interactions and you form a reputation as someone people want to work with.

## Living Through a Tough Professional Time

Kevin doesn’t pretend work isn’t difficult. But, he is resilient. Here are six things he pays attention to:

1. **Focus.** “Each day, I write down what I need to accomplish. The things that aren’t important fall off.”
2. **Trust.** “I’ve got people working for me that I trust.”
3. **Perspective.** “Every day, it feels like there’s negativity, from my peers or from people working the process. But it is not as bad as it was when we started! And, this is normal when you try to do big transformation.”
4. **Future.** “We are going in the right direction ... By the end of this year, we’ll see more results and morale will pick up.”
5. **Family.** “I’ve got a family. My wife, our kids, our parents ... that’s why I work.”
6. **Gratitude.** “I was first in my family to go to college. I have a good job. I take pride in what I do ... That’s my driver—recognizing what I have versus what I did have. I’m thankful; it could be a lot worse.”

### ABOUT THE RESEARCH & ROB CROSS

Building on 20 years of research with more than 300 organizations, the Network Leader Research Project seeks to understand the approach and strategies that enable certain leaders to consistently achieve peak performance. The research includes 160 in-depth interviews conducted by Rob Cross, a Professor of Management at University of Virginia’s McIntire School of Commerce. The Connected Commons is currently focusing its research on leadership effectiveness, talent optimization and organizational alignment and change—three areas where network insights can clearly drive performance. For more information visit [www.connectedcommons.com](http://www.connectedcommons.com) or email Rob at [rlcrossjr@gmail.com](mailto:rlcrossjr@gmail.com).