

Aluminum Trailer Company

Team Approach Paves the Way

By Crickett Gibbons

A small group of welders at Aluminum Trailer Company (ATC) in Nappanee gathers in front of a large whiteboard. It's time for the daily reflection meeting, when team members talk about that shift's work, identify any abnormalities or problems, and brainstorm countermeasures or solutions.

"What do you think, guys?" asks Rickie Glassburn, weld shop team lead for that area. The topic was the inconvenient placement of a tool that was needed only intermittently. After one particular suggestion, Glassburn offers, "Let's try it and see. If it doesn't work, we will go to Plan B."

During the 15-minute meeting, Glassburn also touches on quality and safety, noting how many days had passed – almost three years – since a recordable injury in their area.

"Look out for each other. Look out for yourself," he reminds the group.

The reflection, or Tier 2, meeting "helps us grow as a team and a company," Glassburn explains afterward. "(We) get the team involved. Get them engaged and part of the decision as a team."

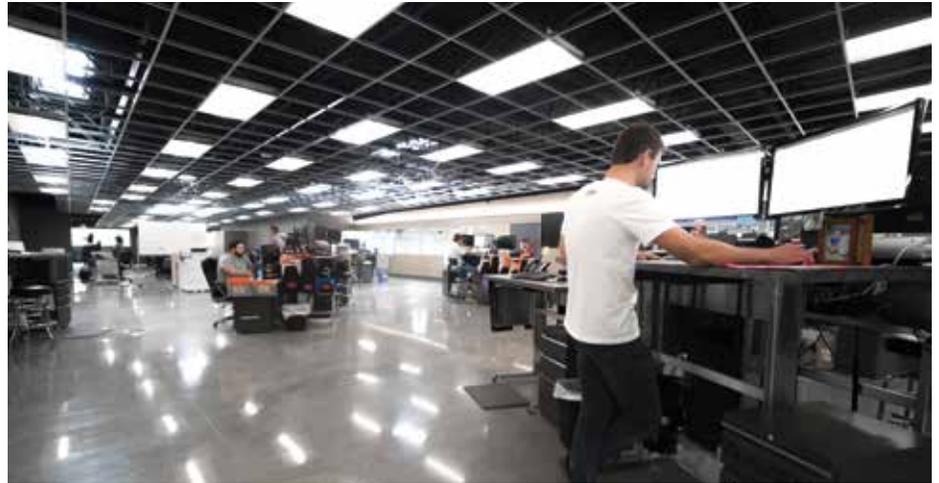
The weld team meeting – and others that happen daily in all production areas at ATC – reflects a substantial shift in the workplace and culture that has evolved since founder and CEO Steve Brenneman first incorporated lean manufacturing practices nine years ago. The company builds custom and semi-custom trailers, including the ATC, Raven and Quest lines.

It also reveals some of the core values – respect and caring for others – ingrained in Brenneman before he started building trailers in a garage in 1999.

Helping others

When asked about the culture at ATC, the soft-spoken Brenneman pauses to collect his thoughts, then starts at the beginning: his early years growing up in the Mennonite church.

"A big part of that culture is service to others, understanding another person's point of view. ... We believe we were given talents, and the way we live out our calling is



Several departments are housed in an open workspace at Aluminum Trailer Company, which facilitates lean processes and teamwork.

to use those talents to benefit others."

He concedes that there are individual benefits in business, but the core value of helping others remains. "So when you have folks who work for you, you feel responsible for them. But not just them, also the families they support, the people they take care of."

At minimum, ATC pays a wage that will support a family of four without overtime, according to Brenneman. "That's the starting point," he stresses. In addition, employees enjoy profit sharing, a retirement plan that includes a company match, health insurance, paid time off to volunteer, wellness programs and other benefits.

The company also pulls together if someone needs additional support during an illness or health issue. "We look for ways to help people," he comments.

Looking down the road

Brenneman believes in taking an extended view for the company and its employees. "We invest in people so they stay for the long term, and that investment will pay off because what we invest in those people gets better and better."

Three years ago, ATC created a new position specifically to support employee development. People Development Director Colin Rusel says his job is "networking with the teams and leadership at ATC to provide opportunities for leadership development and team improvement."

"Exceptional people make this a good

place to work. If you find exceptional people, you need to respect them and take care of those people. ... We want to be a place where people can come and work for a career if they want to. We don't want to cycle people through, either because of a layoff or burning people out."

The turnover rate is lower than industry standard, although Brenneman mentions it's been somewhat higher in recent years.

"Some of that is due to the intense competition for workers in this county," he says. "But it's not just that. We've had to adjust to a different mentality for our workers as well. We moved away from piece rate work to straight hourly plus profit-sharing." That shift in 2012 didn't appeal to everyone.

Employee input valued

For others, the opportunity to be part of a company that wants – and expects – their input is satisfying.

As a line worker, Ian Griffith says he appreciates that "they value every employee's input and make sure it's addressed and not shrugged off, from an operations point of view to where we may see safety issues. Nobody's opinion feels unwanted, unneeded or unnecessary. They encourage people to chime in, be part of the conversation and help ATC grow."

Chris Klassen, a mechanical engineer in research and development, values the freedom to make changes. "If I think I have an idea, even if it's unrelated to my job description, I can do something to make it happen. ... We



Ian Griffith appreciates that employee input is valued – and expected – at ATC.

are encouraged to go beyond our job description, as long as it doesn't compromise our daily tasks."

In short, he says, "They encourage us to take initiative."

In the call center, manager Lori Bontrager elaborates: "We are empowered to make mistakes, empowered to make decisions, so we all learn from that."

New facility supports lean

Brenneman's business approach – valuing employees, planning for

the long term and incorporating lean principles – is working. ATC was recognized as one of the top 5,000 fastest-growing companies in 2017 by *Inc.* magazine and an Indiana Company to Watch in 2013 by the Indiana Economic Development Corporation.

"Since 2009 we've doubled (revenue) twice and are ready to double a third time," he shares.

To accommodate the growth, ATC moved part of its production and offices to a new 110,000-square-foot facility in August 2017, which provides an opportunity to further improve the company's lean manufacturing capabilities.

Klassen works side by side with other engineers in one section of a large workspace where functions are grouped together, but not separated by walls. Engineering, sales, purchasing, information technology, marketing and the executive team are located upstairs in an open mezzanine that overlooks the production floor.

Natural light streams through large windows, many looking out on a wooded area where a crushed limestone path for exercise will be added – useful for breaks and the company's various health and fitness challenges.

Inside the new 4,500-square-foot common area, employees can play table tennis, prepare food using a bank of microwaves and kitchen area, and relax at cafeteria-style tables. The space is big enough to hold all 275 employees for regular updates from the executive team on company performance.

With the profit-sharing program, "when the company makes money, so do we," Rusel points out. "Steve and the executive team are very transparent about how the company is doing."

RESOURCE: Aluminum Trailer Company at www.aluminumtrailer.com

WHAT MAKES US A BEST WORK PLACE?
WE HAVE THE BEST PEOPLE

PACERS SPORTS & ENTERTAINMENT

