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# Menomonee Falls funds collaborative process improvement program with WAT grant

A new grant for the Village of Menomonee Falls could play a critical role in the area's ongoing efforts to attract and retain talent.

Menomonee Falls is the third largest manufacturing center in the state (behind Milwaukee and the Fox Valley), and more people work than live there. In addition, it is home to several corporate headquarters – including Kohls Corporation and Cousins Subs – and over 275 local businesses that belong to the Menomonee Falls Chamber of Commerce.

The Village recently received a \$170,000 Workforce Advancement Training (WAT) grant from the state, to be administered via a partnership with Waukesha County Technical College. Through the Falls Chamber, local businesses contributed an additional \$30,000. The state of Wisconsin budgets about \$4 million total for WAT grants annually.

The groundwork for the current initiative was laid in 2011, when Dr. Patricia Greco assumed the role of superintendent for the Menomonee Falls school district. Under her direction, classroom teachers began PDSA (Plan Do Study Act) training. PDSA is based on Edwards Deming's highly respected work in the field of continual improvement for products and processes. She was looking for a way to build the infrastructure for improvement within the district, so that even when faced with a different set of needs 20 years in the future, a consistent process could effectively address them.

"We don't want random acts of quality," says Greco. "We want to create systems that allow everyone to deliver it – now and in the future."

She adds, "Ultimately, we're working to translate the skills we teach in the classroom into real world skills that are meaningful in the workplace. This is a collaborative effort between education and industry, a two-way street."

One of the district's direct partners is the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching at Stanford University. It hopes to assess how Continuous Improvement is being driven in the district – from the leadership level all the way to the classroom.

The foundational idea is that when you approach learning from a systems and process improvement standpoint instead of just looking at the specific deliverable, people learn how to think, monitor their own progress and continually build on what they know. Once relegated to the list of "soft skills" in hiring, problem solving is now cited as being one of the things that 21st century employers prize most. This is no surprise in a work world where rapid change has

become nearly the only consistent factor.

The program grew quickly. The district pulled in WCTC to help connect students to post-secondary preparation, and worked with Cardinal Stritch and Carroll Universities on preparing students for the transition to a 4-year college.

It didn't take long until the partners realized that quality, preparation and transition couldn't be contained inside the walls of schools, Greco reached out to area employers in high demand fields. Her efforts were so well received that an open meeting was called, to share the district's efforts and invite participation. Community Memorial Hospital hosted, and representatives from over 40 local businesses attended. The hospital became a founding partner in the program the grant will fund.

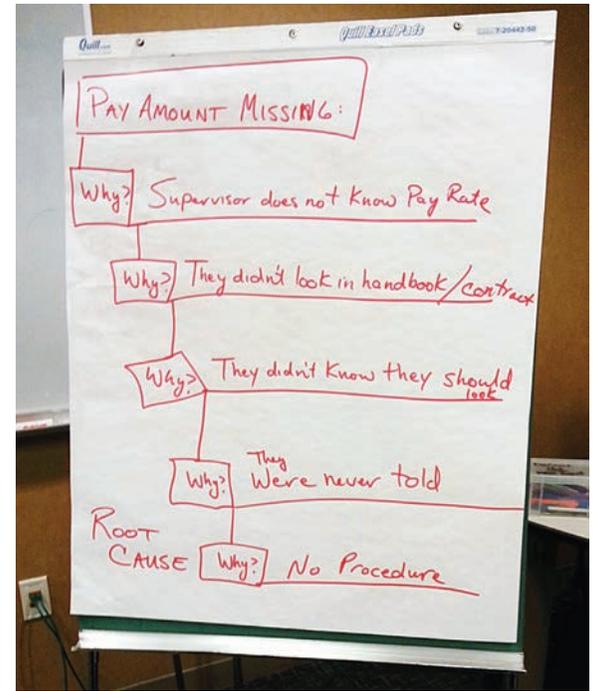
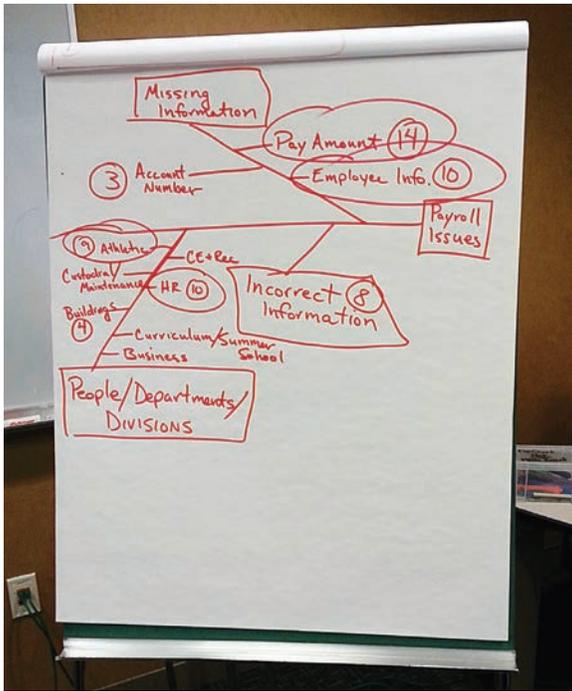
"We're proud to be involved," said Diane Ehn, Vice President of Quality and Performance improvement at Froedtert & the Medical College of Wisconsin Community Memorial Hospital. "Simply put, Plan Study Do Act (PSDA) is at the heart of our own internal performance improvement tactics. It's a program we can get behind, because we live it."

Linda Pintor, Vice President of Human Resources for Mag-natek, was also an early evangelist.

"The school feeds us many of the employees that come into our workplace; it's kind of a neat connection. I've gone



GRECO



Kindergartners discuss the PDSA cycle as State Superintendent Tony Evers, left, listens.



School District of Menomonee Falls Superintendent Dr. Patricia Greco discusses the district's quality improvement process during a visit by 150 educators and quality improvement professionals.

to the high school and taught interview skills to the seniors, and we talk to the middle schools about career paths. So it really deepens our relationship with the school system.”

In 2012, Dr. Joe Weitzer, Dean of WCTC’s Center for Business Performance Solutions, led a formal Needs Assessment of the Village to identify challenges specific to local businesses. Then there were follow-up focus groups to narrow down specific programs that could help businesses of all kinds. In the end, the Village received funding for four different programs: Leadership Development, Lean Initiatives for Process Improvement, Customer Service and Project Management.



WEITZER

Training is available for all participating businesses, and is centered around those four areas of need, but not specific to any one company’s size or specialty.

About 20 training events are planned so far, and it’s anticipated that the grant will fund training for about 300 local employees from companies ranging from large manufacturers to corner coffee shops.

“What excites me” says Weitzer, “is that it’s a signal that employers are finding tangible ways to reinvest in their workforce and its development. It benefits everyone. Investing directly in employees improves retention, creates stronger employees and, ultimately, can have a very positive impact on the bottom line.”

Whether B2B or B2C, the program’s goal is not to find new ways to compete for price, but to consistently provide the best customer experience. If successful, the partners hope it will be a powerful tool to attract, grow and retain local business.

“Our commitment to the program is two-fold,” explains Ehn. “Community Memorial Hospital is part of the Menomonee Falls community; this is another way we engage with and remain good stewards of Menomonee Falls. Second, this program allows us to pull expertise from other industries, not just health care. We can all learn from each other through sharing best practices, problem solving together, collaborating on standard techniques that work, building valuable partnerships and ensuring consistency of customer service in our own community.”

The training isn’t always tied to direct promotion for employees, but indirectly can provide greater mobility and advancement by improving skills and offering the opportunity to understand the wider local business community better.

Toni Gumina Yates, Executive Director of the Menomonee Falls Chamber of Commerce, has also been instrumental to the program.

“The Chamber is continually working to create or identify opportunities for business education and development for its members. This is a great example of this type of opportunity.”

Pintor also sees a strong bottom line value proposition for Magnatek, whose employees mostly live in Menomonee Falls.

“If we do this training in Menomonee Falls, then our employees don’t have to go quite as far as WCTC for training. And these programs extend my training budget so that I can offer more quality development to more Magnatek employees for a lower price.

Greco, whose goals for this work reach far beyond her school district, or even the Village of Menomonee Falls, sums it up. If successful, she says, “This will transform how organizations think. And if we can figure out how to partner across organizations, it shares energy and produces the desired result by building people up, not just focusing on accountability. This is the ‘how we get there.’” ■

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