

Productivity Alberta

Articles

Bringing Productivity to the Peace Country

Three years ago, productivity consultant Janet Plante was the owner of Davco Solutions Inc. and things were getting ugly.

The manufacturing company and its 70 employees faced a modern crisis; it had more work than it could handle.

Productivity was down to 50% and a funk of bad attitudes was settling in amongst the staff. Something had to change.

“It just got worse and worse,” said Plante, shaking her head as she remembered, “You couldn’t find people to do the job and the people you could find quite often felt like they didn’t have to work so you were very unproductive.”

The boom in Alberta was in full swing. There was an overflow of work and costs were escalating. The 51-year-old owner/manager/president/CEO (Plante switched titles whenever necessary) planned her attack. Toxic attitudes, bad planning and poor management had to go.

“It was an uphill battle,” Plante said, of her productivity overhaul, “dealing with really old ways of thinking.”

After announcing the plan to her employees, Plante arranged further training for her management and became more selective of the contracts Davco accepted. More time



was spent planning, organizing and ensuring that employees always had the right tools.

Not everyone on staff liked it. “We had to draw a line in the sand,” she said, of her staff. Plante told them they’d be given all the skills and support they needed to improve and grow with the company. The only caveat – they had to be willing. Not everyone was. “And so a lot of them left,” she said, “That helped a lot.”

The most immediate effect of the overhaul? “Well, we started making more money,” Plante laughed, “That’s a good one.” Though the number of staff decreased, revenue per employee increased by 30%. Company morale improved. Productivity was soon closer to 85%.

Despite the improvements at Davco, tough times were coming. The company had doubled its shop floor from 15,000 square feet to over 30,000 square feet. A research and innovation project – a mobile sawmill – ended up 1000% over budget, costing \$1.16 million.

When the Royal Bank of Canada called in Davco’s mortgage loan in September 2009, it was game over. “We tried to find alternative sources of capital... You name it, we tried it,” she said. Nothing worked.

Ironically, in the six months between the bank’s decision and Davco going into receivership, the company’s fortunes started

reversing. “We were really productive, business increased, revenue was up, we were making really good dollars,” said Plante, “so we were successful again. We didn’t go out as a failure and that makes a big difference.”

Still, Plante found herself unemployed and the business her father started, dead. Davco officially shut its doors in April, 2010. In June, she and her long-time colleague Mike Dyck, Davco’s operations manager, launched their productivity consulting firm, Blue Collar Consulting (BCC.) The idea came organically, according to Plante. Everywhere they looked, they saw businesses that could profit from improved productivity through an injection of outside expertise. In its infancy, BCC has already fielded requests for help from Canadian Mental Health Services, the Red Cross, and the Volunteer Services Bureau in Grande Prairie. Five manufacturers are also interested, Plante said, “They really feel like they need to get right onto this now so that they are at least ahead of the curve when the next wave of busy-ness comes. And it’s coming.”

Plante said her first task is convincing businesses that paying some one to create a better business strategy, which could include revamping unwieldy systems, establishing better communication and establishing what training staff need, can have a major positive impact on the bottom line – not to mention on morale. Particularly in Northern Alberta, she explained, people are used to being innovative.

They've had to be, in such an isolated area. This stoicism creates a wariness of asking for outside aid, she said. "We really need to educate industry in such a manner that they recognize the importance of getting better at what they do ... and they ask for help." Plante's personal approach to productivity includes being smart about technology.

"Interestingly enough, I don't use a Blackberry and my calendar is in a book," she said, "I leave my phone in my Jeep when I have a meeting. I believe to get a job well done you have to focus." Productivity comes down to getting the maximum output from the input you invest, Plante said. Right now, she's focusing on putting her best work possible into BCC. The output will come. "Success stories?" she said, "Not yet. Ask me in six months. I'm sure we'll have a few."