

MANUFACTURING LEADERSHIP

Conor McGarry, Plant Manager Zumtobel Lighting | WITH JOHNNIEANNE HANSEN

LIGHTING THE WAY

THE COUNCIL OF INDUSTRY'S CERTIFICATE IN MANUFACTURING LEADERSHIP (CML) IS A CORNERSTONE PROGRAM OF OUR ASSOCIATION. WE THOUGHT WE WOULD FOLLOW-UP WITH A RECENT GRADUATE OF THE PROGRAM TO LEARN MORE ABOUT THEM, THEIR ROLE IN THEIR COMPANY AND WHAT, IF ANYTHING THEY TOOK AWAY FROM THE PROGRAM. IN THIS ARTICLE COUNCIL OF INDUSTRY VICE PRESIDENT JOHNNIEANNE HANSEN INTERVIEWS 2015 CML GRADUATE CONOR MCGARRY.



JH: So why don't you start with telling me a little bit about Zumtobel Lighting?

CM: Zumtobel Lighting is a global company, here in the U.S. we manufacture lighting fixtures for the commercial, industrial, and residential industries. We have done and continue to do major projects with some of the largest name brands in the U.S. in various industries. It can be a million-dollar project, or a four-hundred-dollar project depending on the size of the spec.

JH: Currently, what is your role?

CM: I'm the plant manager here. I manage day to day operations, planning head count, working with continuous improvement, productions scheduling – including a daily production meeting with each department. I also work directly with customer service to make sure they are updated with lead times or delays. I've been a plant manager for just over two years.

JH: Tell me how you got here, what was your high school experience like and how did you get into manufacturing?

CM: I did not have a lot of direction, on my own part, I was going through the motions. I did not see a clear picture of what I was going to do. It was more, get by with decent grades, get into a good school and it will work out.

JH: Did you have the opportunity to take engineering classes or vocational programs like BOCES?

CM: Yeah, I mean I had the opportunity, but I didn't go. I would never want to put this on others - it was primarily my lack of direction, but the meetings that I had with counselors and family friends, topics like BOCES didn't even come up. I knew about BOCES, but I didn't consider myself mechanically inclined, I wasn't the kid who spent my time tearing down and rebuilding engines for fun. When I was looking at what to do in college, I never even considered engineering, at that point I thought I wanted something interesting to me, like history.

JH: I know you went to Manhattan College, what was your major?

CM: I did three years in general studies at Manhattan College with a focus on sociology. I just couldn't figure it out when it came to education. Maybe it was the structure of it that kept me from making it work, knowing that if I wanted to study sharks I had to learn about every fish in the ocean, which was not appealing, it was not simple for me. I wasn't motivated enough and maybe I needed to have my back up against the wall to get motivated at that point in my life.

JH: At that point, you decided to leave school and look for a job? How did you end up working at a machine shop?

CM: I took that route because it had been something my father did before he made his career choice, working in manufacturing. My grandfather had been heavily involved in it too, with a

company in Poughkeepsie that is no longer around.

When I started in the workforce, I knew I had to be aggressive about it. I was determined not to move backwards and was looking for a job that had potential.

JH: It seems like you hit the ground running, considering you didn't have any machine shop experience. How did you manage to break into the industry?

CM: When I started in the machine shop, I think my perception was, okay, I'm not the most experienced or talented on the machine but I was certainly the guy that they could rely on. I saw a lot of talent around me, but not really the drive to advance. The people at the shop seemed to be satisfied with where they were. Partly because I was young, I saw the opportunity and I was a little more aggressive about it. Being eager and assertive earned me some leadership roles with that first company.

After two years I was looking for a new opportunity and ended up at Zumtobel in the machine shop. I saw the same kind of scenario; people were content but there were opportunities to grow.

JH: Sometimes we hear that it is difficult to change directions in this field. How did you get from the entry level machine shop to a plant manager?

CM: I remember this guy walking by who I really didn't know, he worked in the research and development department and he said he was quitting. And I said, I'm going to wait for him to leave and walk into H.R. and tell them I want the job, not even wait for them to post it. I had taken a beginner AutoCAD class at BOCES and had some drafting experience. I got that position. It was an engineering role with new product development, I worked closely with new product development engineers. They would come up with the design, I could go to the factory, produce the parts, do a mockup and give feedback.

JH: At that point was your superpower that you had already been on the other side and that you were coming into the engineering side with that production experience?

CM: Yes, absolutely. It was having that taste of the factory and being able to bring that over to the engineering side rather than bringing in someone new who really didn't understand or maybe was not fresh with the product or the machinery.

But yeah. And it's pretty much the same story going into the next role.

A few years later I took a big jump into sales. I knew a position was going to be available and I wanted to pursue it, I went after that role and then spent four years doing post sales management. It was a good fit because of my technical ability and understanding of the product. It required travel all over the country and in some cases overseas. If an issue came up in the field with a contractor or an end user, I would assist either remotely or onsite and work directly with their contractors on the issue. After proving myself for a few years, I was approached with the opportunity to come back into operations as a production supervisor, it was the right time. I was in my late 20's and I didn't want to be traveling for the rest of my life.

Over the next few years opportunities came up as a natural progression and I'd like to think I was a logical choice for the Plant Manager position when it opened up.

I wouldn't say I landed here - it was a combination of gaining experience, learning from those around me, and seeking opportunities. It was also a lot of hard work.

JH: In 2015, you were coming back into the operations side and beginning your leadership career, you also completed the Council of Industry's Certificate in Manufacturing Leadership program - tell me a little about your experience.

CM: The certificate program was great. The classes were designed to take you from where you are, in some cases it's foundational, but that is the purpose - building on what you already bring to the table. The certificate program helps you expand your perspective and provide skills to approach leadership - it is not a cookie cutter approach.

I think there is a misconception that leaders need to cater to employees - to be a good leader you just need to cater to every whim and abandon standards, expectations, goals or productivity. That is a misunderstanding. I think it is about developing people, learning how to get the best out of them and caring enough to do so. It is about caring, not catering.

JH: What advice do you have for decision makers that are considering sending their employee to our program?

CM: Companies should send individuals who really want to understand and embrace the opportunity, people who will be open to learning and want to expand their leadership capabilities. Leadership is more than just a role you are placed in, sometimes companies send people they are trying to change versus identifying individuals who are eager to learn, grow and lead.

JH: What course stands out in your memory?

CM: That's easy. "Issues in Human Resources Management." It was presented by Jackson Lewis, labor attorneys. They covered things from the legal side. If you are not in human resources, it's



Conor and machine operator, Russel Wallace reviewing production run on a laser cutting machine.

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possible to take it for granted or dismiss it or even get annoyed by various policies. Tom McDonough and his colleague took a difficult and possibly dry topic and made it interesting and impactful. Whenever another Zumtobel employee attends the leadership program, I always ask them about the HR class and they say the same thing, it's like seeing behind the curtain and the trainers are great.

Also, I can't say enough about "Fundamentals of Leadership" with Rebecca Mazin, it was helpful to begin the program with a process to identify your own leadership style. I try not to get too stuck on it because I want to be versatile and continuously improve, but sometimes it helps to understand yourself and how you approach a situation. It also gives you a frame of reference to understand the leadership styles of your peers and how they approach the same situation.

JH: In addition to the presenters and the leadership topics, what else stands out about the program?

CM: I really enjoyed meeting people from other companies. I've spent most of my career at Zumtobel, and the Certificate Program gave me the opportunity to hear other manufacturing professionals share their experiences. Hearing their stories, how they manage day to day and deal with people, it was very interesting. Being able to interact with them on a common goal opened up my eyes to the benefits of collaboration and gave me some insight into how other places worked.

JH: 2020 took a bit of a turn back in March...

CM: Yeah, yeah, yeah. It was a roller coaster at first. It all

happened quickly. Friday morning, we were shutting down until further notice. We were going to keep a few essential employees, the sales force and a skeleton crew working remotely. But the factory was shutting down. By that afternoon we were deemed essential. We called everyone back.

Since then we've been adjusting everyday. We are trying to be as prepared as possible, to keep the doors open and keep people safe. We made changes to the facility, spread out production lines, broke up lunch breaks to small groups. We enhanced our regular cleaning and deep cleaning, and if there was a concern even deeper cleaning, we started doing temperature tests every morning.

JH: In terms of workload, productivity, orders, how are you guys doing?

CM: From a procurement perspective, we had some difficult months, getting materials was a challenge. We have vendors in China, South America and California, it was an issue. If we were able to get the material and complete the order, it was challenging to get it out - things were on hold, job sites were on hold, if we had the order complete, we couldn't ship it.

We knew it was going to have an impact. If we wanted to stay open, we needed to do something about it. We partnered with Usheco, a manufacturer of custom plastic parts and Council of Industry member and Wepco Plastics out of Connecticut to produce face shields. Wepco's orders were overwhelming, they could not keep up. We reached out because we had capacity. We knew if we took on some of the assembly, we could keep people working. We ended up assembling them, we did not do anything with the raw materials, but getting the components together and



Conor and team member, Aki Owens inspecting parts for production.

coordinating, we ended up manufacturing about sixty thousand face shields, helping to keep our community safe and people employed.

JH: As we know, this is all unprecedented and employees are stressed – talk to me a little about leading your team during the pandemic?

CM: It is not as simple as telling people what to do and managing projects, it requires bigger thinking and taking more factors into consideration. It also means managing during difficult times.

We had to keep in mind that people were scared. People may not have been sharing everything that was happening within their household or their community, but what they are going through impacts them, including their workplace situation. Sometimes leadership requires a different level of finesse and patience.

JH: What advice would you give to young people considering a career in manufacturing?

CM: I give myself as an example. I would tell them, I started here as a machine shop operator and now I'm a plant manager. There's possibility here for anybody. At Zumtobel, the training is here, you don't have to worry about that, they will invest in you and there are opportunities. It comes down to your end of the deal, your determination and motivation.

And I think in the manufacturing industry, there is a lot of room for that growth because experience goes a long way, especially if you stay with the same company over a period of time, being able to do that will open doors.

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Thomas McDonough
44 South Broadway • 14th Floor
White Plains, NY 10601
(914) 872-8060
Thomas.McDonough@jacksonlewis.com
www.jacksonlewis.com

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