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### **Business Leaders Go Lean**

Dozens of area business and industry employers gathered recently to study "Implementing the Lean Supply Chain" and to share their Lean journeys. The half-day seminar, co-sponsored by the Economic Development Coalition for Asheville-Buncombe County (EDC), Asheville Area Chamber of Commerce and North Carolina State University Industrial Extension Service (NCSU IES), represented one of many ongoing initiatives the EDC has in place to help existing business and industry retain and expand their operations.

Clark Duncan, director of business and industry services for the EDC said, "As a Lean practitioner, you focus on waste elimination, inventory reduction and flow while also creating a problem-solving culture and developing leaders as teachers. Understanding logistics and supply chain management and how to apply Lean to these business functions is the next logical step in realizing the benefits of a Lean Culture."

Logistics, supply chain, material and inventory management professionals from a diverse cross section of area employers attended the seminar. The EDC subsidized participation for Buncombe County employers to encourage greater participation and access to Lean workplace practices, benefits and training.

"More and more North American companies have been embracing Lean as a way of doing business, and many have experienced incredible results," said Roger Pearce, a national trainer and Lean expert for LeanCor, LLC, who led the event. "These

companies have learned that Lean is not simply a set of tools, but rather a cultural change that focuses on creating an organization that learns everyday through waste identification, elimination, and problem solving.”

Chris McGraw, manufacturing specialist with NCSU IES, said many companies in Western North Carolina and Buncombe County have incorporated some level of Lean. Since 2005, four area companies—Volvo Construction, Eaton Electrical, Snap-On Tools and Baxter Healthcare—have received the Shingo Prize, often described as the Nobel Prize for Lean.

Julie Tipton Rhodes, inventory manager for J. Crew’s distribution center in Asheville, said the seminar provided an enhancement for seasoned professionals and a great introduction to Lean supply chain for those new to the concept formally.

“Lean manufacturing and management is at the heart of any successful enterprise,” she said. “The core principles of excellence, quality and customer service are pervasive within J. Crew. We have an environment that cultivates and embraces innovation and where process improvements and Lean fundamentals are alive.”

“The success of Lean relies heavily on engaging employees and empowering them to make changes that they believe are needed” said Erica Chard, production control manager for Kearfott Corporation in Asheville. “It takes time and energy to work with employees to identify opportunities for improvement, to brainstorm potential solutions, and then to agree upon an achievable implementation plan. But this investment is well worth the effort, as it’s one of the most critical elements involved in implementing real, sustainable and needed change.”

The comprehensive practice of eliminating waste and maximizing value-added aspects not only applies to manufacturing, but also to retailers, distribution centers, service industries, healthcare, and wholesalers.

Caroljean Mazza, purchasing manager for CarePartners, who also attended the seminar, said when she first started working at the healthcare services firm, it became

quite clear that the Lean culture wasn't just for manufacturing. "In order to survive the never-ending cuts from payor sources and still provide quality care, CarePartners embarked on a Lean journey to respond to changes quickly and efficiently."

"After identifying inefficiencies with paperwork processing, staff worked on a better and more eco-friendly solution to get the paperwork to the right place, at the right time, in the right order, the first time without re-work. Staff now scans paperwork to a virtual mailbox thus eliminating unnecessary copying and time spent troubleshooting discrepancies, re-works and mismatched paperwork."

Lean is not an easy fix or the next buzz word. Instead, it's a philosophy that embraces continuous improvement from the source of the process, Mazza emphasized.

At the end of the three-hour overview on the Lean supply chain, many participants like Mazza requested more in-depth classes; Duncan and McGraw are collaborating on a potential series.

"The seminar's success reflects a forward-thinking approach in our business community, one that continues to drive innovation and investment in the Asheville region." said Duncan.

The EDC for Asheville-Buncombe County is a public-private partnership dedicated to the continuous improvement of the local and regional economy. The EDC is funded by Buncombe County, the City of Asheville, and the Asheville Area Chamber of Commerce through the Advantage Asheville campaign. For more information, visit [www.EconomicDevelopmentAsheville.org](http://www.EconomicDevelopmentAsheville.org), or call (828) 258-6117.