



RON CARUTH welds a section of a storm drain grate at Syracuse Castings in Cicero. The company makes storm drain

covers and hatch covers for underground utility vaults. Some of the welding is done by robots.

Al Campanie / Staff photographer

The Right Place

Re-evaluation helps reshape Syracuse Castings

By Charley Hannagan
Staff writer

The workers at Syracuse Castings read books about lean manufacturing and toured factories that had implemented those techniques. Then they looked at their factory in a new way.

That's when they realized every machine was in the wrong place.

Workers making access hatches, manhole covers and grates didn't have the right tools or materials nearby to do their jobs. It took weeks to fill orders.

And the phones in the office rang with calls from customers needing products.

"We were a reactionary organization," recalled Operations Manager Timothy J. McKernan.

Syracuse Castings is reactionary no more.

The company is growing as a result of the changes. It has begun to move from its market base in the Northeast to national and international markets.

The privately held company is part of the Campbell Group. It has \$14 million to \$16 million a year in sales. In May, for the first time, it rewarded workers with a \$925 bonus for their efforts.

The changes wouldn't have been possible had the company not also changed its culture, said Vice President and General Manager Mark D. Pulver.

"The lean manufacturing goes in on a cultural foundation of worker empowerment," he said. "That's what makes it work. It allows you to take care of business."

The company changed its organiza-

tional structure when Pulver's father, Harry Pulver, retired, McKernan said. Harry Pulver was one of the founders of Syracuse Castings.

Pulver worked for Campbell Foundry Co. in New Jersey. He and Campbell president John Campbell saw an opportunity to expand the company by buying a foundry on Marcellus Street in Syracuse.

They bought the company in 1971 and moved the operations to South Bay Road in Cicero when the business expanded in 1973. Five years later, it bought a Buffalo steel products fabricator; that product line was moved to Cicero in 1993.

Syracuse Castings practiced the traditional "command and control" method of leadership during Harry Pulver's tenure, McKernan said. The boss told workers what to do, and workers took every problem to the boss, he said.

The system worked while the company was small, but it hampered growth, McKernan said.

Harry Pulver retired, and in 1995, his son, Mark, took over. Mark Pulver had recently graduated from Syracuse University with a master's degree in business administration for executives. A year later, Mark Pulver began converting the company's management style to a team-based system, McKernan said.

A team system encouraged different departments to work together. Sales people, for example, now speak directly to factory workers to make sure orders are made on time, he said.

The system also flattened out the busi-

ness, McKernan said. It allowed workers to order their own raw materials when needed or to take care of customers right away without having to get authority from a boss to make changes, he said.

Next, the company looked at lean manufacturing, a technique of taking unnecessary steps out of manufacturing processes. Taking out steps saves money and makes a company more competitive.

That's when the company — workers and managers — realized that every machine in the factory was out of place.

"One of the most frustrating things for a worker is when he doesn't have the tools to do the job," McKernan said.

The company created teams of people from across the organization to take a hard look at manufacturing processes. They asked workers for their ideas about how to make work stations more efficient, McKernan said.

Then Syracuse Castings took a month off and rearranged the factory, he said.

"I'm actually glad they did it," said Matt Klish, of DeWitt, who makes aluminum access hatches that go into places such as pumping stations. "It makes our jobs easier. We have more room now," said Klish, who has worked in the factory for six years.

Production has increased too, said Ron Caruth, of Van Buren. He makes grates used in road construction in Pennsylvania.

"What used to take a month for me to get the paperwork, I get it in days," he said. "It's so much better this way."