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Advances in Springmaking

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Leadership Lessons from COVID-19

By Gary McCoy,
Managing Editor

Normally in this space we profile a spring manufacturing company in our industry. It's an opportunity to tell the unique story about how and when the business started and the growth that has occurred. With COVID-19 having a crippling effect on our industry, it has been a challenge to put these articles together. The sentiment has often been, "I'd like to do help you, but I just don't

have the time right now since we have several people out with COVID and we are trying to keep our customers happy."

In light of that, this edition of Springmaker Spotlight focuses on the pandemic, which has forced everyone to change how they do business. While everyone is still producing springs, wireforms and stampings for their customers, they have had to put together procedures to ensure the safety of their workforce.

What was once unheard of is now commonplace, such as workers wearing masks, having their temperature checked on a regular basis and being socially distanced from their colleagues.

Leadership has always been important when a crisis occurs, be it a fire, a market collapse, a customer setback or a pandemic. Considering that, I asked a few springmakers to answer the question: "How has the COVID-19 pandemic influenced your approach to work and leadership?"

Firmer on Rules

When this first started to hit everyone in March 2020, we were fortunate that we did not have any cases impact our employees until the end of October. From October through the end of November, we had 21 positive cases out of 155 employees. One of the 21 people died.

From the beginning, we have had staggered lunches and breaks, adjusted the start times for second shift to minimize the overlap of employees, purchased temperature monitoring devices and allowed employees to come and go through two main doors, closing off the other doors from outside access. I also have eliminated my weekly updates with all employees, reducing this down to just the supervisors and facilitators weekly.

This is the hard information on changes. As far as my approach, it has caused me to be firmer on rules and

requirements. A lot of people do not want to wear masks, but it is not an option here. It has also caused us to increase the level of inventory we carry to ensure we can meet customer expectations.



Chris Witham, President,
Motion Dynamics
Corporation, Fruitport,
Michigan

A New Set of Leadership Skills

It has been an interesting year for all of us. “We are all in this together” is the least correct statement I hear. Since each state is making up its own rules, it makes it very difficult for us to find common ground. And, with ever-changing rules and suggestions that are masked as rules, it takes the team time to figure out the correct moves on a weekly, if not daily, basis. So, when it comes to the working environment we must find a way to allow people to stay safe, but also allow them to have the freedom they wish for and need. You can put up absolute rules, but that can conflict with the culture of our business and team. It can conflict with the core values of the company.

My job has changed to making sense of new rules and sorting out what can work and what can be harmful. Within our own state, the rules are different for each type of manufacturing. It depends on who has the most influence with our politicians. It has nothing to do with it being safe or helpful.

In leading our team we have had to look at so many issues that we have never thought of in our space. Some of these are helpful because we have to consider so many variables. With a diverse workforce, there is so much to consider. The age of people seems to set the fear level set up by the media and our government. You would think the older people would have more fear, but the younger ones are equally fearful. It seems the more people watch the “news,” the more fear they feel and the more distrust they amplify.

How do you use all of this? We have pushed our marketing plan to its highest

level. Now is the time to get back our customers who have moved to foreign companies. We have to be there for our customers who have been forced to close. Once they reopen, we have to work with them to solve their issues of catching up with their production. We have to know that this could be a short-term “fix,” but we work to make their businesses come back to life. For the companies that have closed for good, we are working to help find new vendors to take on the old products.

As far as raw materials and supply chains, we are all working harder than ever to find materials for our customers’ products. With so many mills and other suppliers working to capacity to keep up, it is going to be a hard road ahead to fill the needs of our customers. And with rising prices, it will take a new level of education for us and our customers as to what is the new reality.

To be a leader right now takes a new skill set that many of us have never had to use. We are running a business and navigating a political and world reality that is new and ever-changing. We have to be strong and sensitive and intuitive and open to complete this new challenge. It is said it takes 21 days to form a new habit. We have been at this for far too many 21-day periods. Now we have to figure out what new habits are real and useful,

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and what is dangerous and controlling. This isn’t over yet. Whatever it is we are moving toward is still a mystery. We must be stronger and smarter than we ever imagined.



Scott Rankin, President,
Vulcan Spring, Telford,
Pennsylvania

Rethinking the Way We Do Things

To say the COVID-19 pandemic has made operating a business very challenging may be the understatement of the year. More than 40 years of experience could not have prepared us for what was coming. Considered by our government to be an essential service, manufacturers such as ourselves had to quickly adapt in March 2020 to protect employees while continuing production. This certainly presented new management challenges every day, as we were scrambling to keep up with public health advice.

Some of our largest customers in the automotive industry shut down for 12 weeks, so we quickly went to a four-day workweek to avoid layoffs. Eventually we were approved for the formal work

sharing program so our employees could collect EI on their days off. We were fortunate that nobody became ill and that the protocols we had put into place seemed to be working. We had to manage through several key employees having to stay home and self-quarantine when they came into contact with family members who returned from overseas or who did test positive. Every day we have to exercise caution and monitor our employees' health while encouraging anyone who can work from home to do so.

Thanks to our information technology department, we were able to quickly adapt to work at home [beginning] in March 2020, and this has continued and is even more important during the "second" wave. We have really had to think about the way we do things and ensure that our employees are practicing safe distancing, wearing masks and reporting to us if they don't feel well. We developed a COVID-19 policy which allows employees 50 percent of their salary if they need to stay home due to COVID-19. We believe this is going to be an ongoing challenge until everyone is vaccinated, and that could take 10 months or longer.



Chris Wharin, Owner, Bohne Spring Industries Ltd., Toronto, Ontario, Canada

Keeping Positive and Resilient

When the COVID shutdowns started in March 2020, the most immediate impact was reviewing our daily activities to implement social distancing. Our daily meetings had to be canceled. In their place, we used all means possible to communicate — postings, public address (PA) announcements and — most importantly — face-to-face communication. Our team leads were key to making everything work. They really took over production and gave great feedback. Their leadership has been most important.

Since November 2020, our region's COVID case load has been very high. While we have been able to avoid

transmission in our facility, we have lost more than three production days in total due to infections and quarantining. Key employees being out really highlights training needs. We are reviewing each employee's training to identify opportunities and gaps. Our employees have been willing to work in a variety of areas to do whatever it takes to keep parts going to suppliers.

Finally, our team has kept a positive attitude and been resilient every day. It truly takes us all to be successful — their hard work every day is appreciated.



Rick Eitel, Chief Executive Officer/President, Duer/Carolina Coil, Greer, South Carolina



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Creating a Post-COVID Business Plan

What will your business look like once COVID-19 has passed? That question is the premise of a recent *Harvard Business Review* article by Dev Patnaik, Michelle Loret de Mola, and Brady Bates.

The article summary states: “To plan for a post-pandemic world, businesses must understand what your stakeholders’ behaviors will look like after the pandemic. Some behaviors will return to their pre-crisis state; others will be transformed; and others will disappear entirely. Drawing on research into habit formation, technology adoption and behavioral economics, the authors offer a framework to help companies make reasonable predictions on what happens next.”

It’s an article you might want to circulate and discuss with your leadership team.

Visit <https://hbr.org/2021/01/creating-a-post-covid-business-plan>

Concern, Confusion and Contemplation

My approach to COVID-19 was confusion, concern and contemplation.

When the shutdowns began, my initial response was confusion. Are we essential? Are we not essential? Employees want to stay home, should they? Are we all going to die if we come to work? It didn’t take long to be told by multiple customers that we were essential, but there were still questions about whether the city, state and federal government and our employees felt the same way.

My concern came from my responsibility for protecting and considering my

employee’s health versus trying to keep the business running and not sacrificing our customer’s need for parts. After getting past the initial knee-jerk reaction, we were able to accomplish both well. Initially we didn’t mandate masks, we just monitored temperatures daily, stayed as distanced as possible, restricted visitors, etc. This worked well for many months. We had our first positive case in December 2020 and it was not contracted at work. We had our second case in January 2021 and it was also not contracted at work. It was then that we decided that the two cases were too many and we mandated masks. We have several employees with major underlying

conditions, so keeping everyone as safe as possible is my No. 1 concern.

My contemplation was a result of all of the above. Your customers need, expect and, in some cases, make you feel it is required that you continue to service whatever their needs are, but in the long run, it is your people that matter most. My approach to leadership during this whole thing has just been to do my best to make wise decisions for my employees first and my customers second. Some of those decisions have been the hardest I have ever made. I say this because the information we were given almost changed daily, so you always questioned whether your leadership was right or wrong. I know one thing, I’m ready for it to be over!



Phil Jones, President, Industrial Spring Corporation, North Kansas City, Missouri

Communicate Your Story

We have been mindful of the basics, making sure that we continue to communicate our “story” to our employees, customers and suppliers. Relationship management is paramount.

We’ve always communicated well with all these groups, but since COVID we have doubled down on this.

Prior to COVID we had quarterly, all-employee meetings to go over where we are as a company and where we are headed. Since COVID came on the scene, we have held more meetings with employees, simply to reassure them that we are paying attention to their concerns and looking out for them.

We’ve always had a clean workplace, but now it is even better post-COVID. We’ve invested a lot of money to help provide a safe workplace, emphasizing hygiene.



Tim Bianco, President and CEO, Iowa Spring Manufacturing and Sales, Adel, Iowa

Respond, Evaluate, Get Ahead

Tough question, when there are no “How to Conduct Business during Pandemics for Dummies” books laying around. We have relied on discussions between our leadership team and trusted business advisors to plan for and manage difficult times. By talking through what we believe may be the best practice for the current situation, we came to a couple of bullet points that act as a very broad guideline on work and leadership.

Respond: Grip the current situation with understanding and acceptance. Aim to make good decisions that bring steadiness and stability.

Evaluate: What decisions are working, what haven't we thought of that needs addressed, do we need to go in another direction or maintain our current heading?

Get ahead: Did taking the necessary steps halt the impact of crisis?

With luck and sound decisions, the pandemic may bring opportunity that you hope creates further value, rather than maintaining status quo.



Chris Fazio, President, Diamond Wire Spring Company, Glenshaw, Pennsylvania

Some employees wanted to go home, some out of fear of being infected, some because they had children at home, and some, just because. Balancing the need for manpower with empathy for employees and their families was, and remains, one of the biggest challenges of this period.

Communication is Critical

Located in western Pennsylvania, India Springs Inc. felt the impact of the pandemic early in 2020. Our governor declared a state of emergency on March 6, followed by school closures on March 16, and then a business closure/stay-at-home order effective March 19.

The business closure news had quickly spread through the manufacturing sector. After all, teleworking in our industry is as rare as a unicorn. We think we are essential, and we were fortunate that many of our customers agreed and made their thoughts known. We received emails right away stating unequivocally that “you are an essential supplier to us and we need you need to stay in operation.”

We quickly scrambled to obtain masks, and we made the decision to stay open and support our customers and protect our employees. We quickly received a Cybersecurity & Infrastructure Security Agency letter designating us as essential. We made the announcement to all employees that we would stay open, and we authored and distributed “essential worker letters” for employees to carry.

As head of our company's COVID-19 team, I reinforced that communication with employees is always important, and it became critical during the height of the pandemic, critical to maintaining a

workforce and critical in assuring that management is paying attention. Critical to morale. Employees were confused. What were they supposed to do? Bits and pieces of information swirled through the plant floor. Some employees wanted to go home, some out of fear of being infected, some because they had children at home, and some, just because. Balancing the need for manpower with empathy for employees and their families was, and remains, one of the biggest challenges of this period.

Leadership requires a team. A team whose trust comes through communications and actions that display sound reasoning, perseverance, flexibility, and compassion.

Since the epidemic began, commercials, banners, and posters began appearing with phrases like “we're all in this together” and “we'll get through this together.” These became popular and optimistic phrases during difficult times.

With the focus on lessons learned regarding work and leadership, after some thought it came back to the realization that teamwork, combined with proper leadership, leads to success, not just during a pandemic but throughout life in general.

The implied/intended message is that yes, we are all in this (the pandemic) together. And that we have been in this (life in general) together for a long time. The formula for success hasn't changed.



Brian Durkin, Quality Manager, India Springs Inc., McKees Rocks, Pennsylvania