

Listen, learn and be the link: You're in the driver's seat to see the big picture



DAWN BURCHAM CPP, CPLT

Recently, a colleague asked me when I finished school. I told her winter 1990, but I've never stopped learning or taking classes. She asked me what I meant. I told her that as packaging professionals we are placed in unique situations, exposed to almost every business function, are part of research and development, daily production, project cost-out and transportation. We work closely with functions such as industrial services, manufacturing, time study,

master planners, sourcing, supply chain, marketing and sales, and even upper management. We have a unique, inclusive position within many companies, and tend to be the conduit between the functions noted above.

This occurs because we are part of all their respective meetings. As we sit in these different meetings, we learn about their needs, pain points, lead times, and deliverables. If we are truly inclusive, we then share this information with other functions. I have often participated in a production meeting when someone has said, "If only this department could let us know a little earlier, we could respond better." I have shared this information with the department in question, and the process was improved.

I learned something else for future projects. We had an account requiring a specific pallet size and pattern, but manufacturing used the standard 48"x40" GMA pallet internally. The packed item was moved to the shipping department. The shipping department was required to gingerly remove the items from the GMA pallet to the customer-specific pallet. This slowed the shipping process tremendously and caused a backup for picking up other products throughout the plant. I mentioned the pallet issue to the unit manager and asked him if we could move the special pallets to the line and pack directly at the line. He had his team look at the space, the costs, and time study. The decision was yes we could, and this small change saved the company time and money. This ended up being a great collaboration between areas because our pack team was inclusive.

Another great benefit of working with multiple business functions is the wonderful opportunity to learn new methods and processes (SPC, Tegu chi, Six Sigma, 5S, Lean, etc.) Your company may send you to special training opportunities, and you may have the chance to attend trade shows. You also learn as your company introduces a new "system" or you learn a new part of your function. We, as packaging professionals, often have opportunity to partake in these classes and they are continuous education events and should be viewed as such. We also

get to talk to other folks and learn from them. On several occasions, because I had Dale Carnegie and presentation training, I was given the honor to present at packaging trade shows. I also have had the honor to present to upper management for cost-out projects. Without this additional training, I would not have had the confidence to present.

Another unique opportunity is assisting in local schools. As I have continued to be part of secondary education, the student bodies of the places I work with continue to teach me the fundamentals of life. Their respective energies, creative ideas, drive to succeed, and overall happy demeanors remind me of what is important. They teach me to find joy and to look at things with an open, multifaceted mind.

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I encourage you to go tutor, mentor, and get involved with your local schools. The feeling of accomplishment and that you are contributing to the future can be euphoric, especially when you are judging an engineering contest (some students are awe-inspiring). They reminded my team and me to think "outside" the box and try new things.

Overall, learning and education never stop, if you are willing. We as humans have two ears and one mouth. We are designed to listen and learn. My two teenagers share their respective school and sporting days. What they and the other students are learning is incredible. Twenty-five years after college I openly and unapologetically look for new ways to expand my horizons. My challenge to you is to expand your universe. When you are in a business meeting, truly listen to your customer, your colleagues, your boss. Join a work group, a book club, learn crewing or a new sport. Reach out to a local school and offer your time and knowledge. What you receive back is invaluable. Lastly, be a sponge with a brain not a Teflon suit of armor. **PW**

Dawn Burcham, CPP, CPLT is Global Commodity Leader and Packaging Engineer Lead at GE Lighting and Current by GE. For more information on IoPP, visit www.iopp.org.