

-- Speaker 0 00:00:04 Make It Right. The manufacturing podcast.

Speaker 1 00:00:10 Oftentimes we don't know what we can do until we really have to do it this week on the, make it right podcast. It's the story of a manufacturing plant that turned a rapid covert pivot when the need arose prior to the pandemic, this plant was producing colored sheets for the creation of shower, bath and RV panels, but as demand dropped off, so did production in the span of just a few months, this 24 seven plant had to reduce its workforce by 65% and then opportunity knocked. There was high demand for clear acrylic to produce the barriers we see in stores everywhere. So with a significant plant conversion to a totally different process, the company is now busier than ever, and has since seen a near 40% growth and employment. I'm Janet Eastman. And this week on the makeup right podcast, I'm pleased to have Gary Buckland, the senior plant manager of Spartech in Paulding, Ohio share his business turnaround story. Welcome to the show. Gary, you have had a wild ride over the last eight months.

Speaker 2 00:01:14 Yes we have. And thank you for having me on today.

Speaker 1 00:01:18 My pleasure. So explain just what Spartech does. I've kind of given a bit of a brief overview, but explain what it was actually doing prior to COVID-19

Speaker 2 00:01:29 Hey, here in Paulding, uh, we make what we call opaque or solid color, um, materials. I know in your opening, you mentioned RV industry is very big for us. Uh, we do refrigeration, uh, bathtub, shower surrounds, pool steps, uh, agriculture Marine products. So we don't really make end products. We actually produce a plastic sheet that other people use to make and to turn into final products.

Speaker 1 00:01:55 Okay. So how did COVID impact prior to deciding to make this pivot? Now I talked about the company layoffs that are, you know, uh, I guess they weren't layoffs so much as just people couldn't come to work. So how did it affect them? You guys, prior to this, this pivot?

Speaker 2 00:02:13 Yeah, it was quite a bit, I mean, part of our business was deemed vital so we could keep some of our operations going. Um, and about 35% of our workforce continue to work or 65% with put them furlough, uh, just because of again, when you shut the overall economy down, all those industries shut down as well. So there was no need for our product. So, you know, as a result, we had to follow suit on orders, dried up and we had to, uh, for a lot of people at the time. So, you know, this would have been mid March and April, um, and actually mid may when we started going on this path that we're currently on.

Speaker 1 00:02:53 So tell me about the key challenges that you had to face when you made this to produce this clear acrylic in large quantities, there was a plant conversion. You had to get people back to work. You've got social distancing, just paint that scenario.

Speaker 2 00:03:09 Sure. Yeah, it, um, it was definitely a challenge and that probably the biggest thing to do was everybody's mindset. Uh, you know, initially, um, as our volume drops, you're in Paulding, spartek has 14 points across North America and we have several plants that produce, um, clear acrylic materials. Well, with a spike in sales that were, you know, they were seeing her need for the sheet. They could not produce enough. So that's when they put the challenge out and just saying, you know, Hey, is this something Paulding could run? And, um, you know, again, so I challenged my, uh, my people. So the first thing was their mindset. You know, for 50 years, this plant's been running diesel pack or colored products. And now to say, Hey, we're going to run clear a totally different product and totally different process. So the mindset was the first one, but, uh, with the economy being where it was, and so many people in furlough, you know, teen here knew that this was a huge opportunity for us.

Speaker 2 00:04:09 So everybody pulled together, a maintenance team did an amazing job, uh, production people, uh, got everybody together. And that's where we had to do. We had to start and look at our current process to say, okay, you know, when you, when you do solid colors, a lot of things are hidden. Like you don't see little scratches or little things cause it's, you know, it's hidden by the color when you're doing clear sheet, you know, you, your whole process from beginn --

-- ing to end, you know, has to be, you know, scuffed, furry scratch for you can't have any defects in this stuff. So, um, it was a big mindset from what we currently do. Um, so then that's when we had to start looking at our processes and figuring out, you know, melt flows are different the way it melts, it heats, um, processing characteristics. We had to learn all of that and we were able to do it within a two week time span. So it wasn't easy a lot of long days, long nights, but, uh, it took us about two weeks to get the first line up and running.

Speaker 1 00:05:04 So did you actually have to get a different equipment in or anything like that?

Speaker 2 00:05:09 Yeah. We were able to use the majority, our current equipment, but we had to make a lot of modifications to our current processes. So, uh, and that's what we did. It took us the first few days to really sit down and identify the changes we had to make. And then of course I had to get with corporate, uh, you know, bring up, you know, capital requirements, you know, investments we had to make. Um, most of the items, um, actually our in house maintenance team was able to build and convert or modify. And that's how we were able to get such a quick turnaround was just the flexibility that we were able to have due to the skillset that we have in our, you know, maintenance and production people.

Speaker 1 00:05:47 And I guess you had to rely quite heavily on the expertise of those people that, that perform these processes and who really understand them well, because they're the, who are gonna make or break it, whether it works for you or not. Right.

Speaker 2 00:06:01 Yeah. So, and what we were able to do is, and again, this is the nice thing about, you know, being a part of a bigger company, we were able to reach out. So we took our experienced operators here and we got on the phone, had a lot of conference calls with some of our sister plants around, um, one of them in Cape Gerardo, uh, that makes this, uh, the sheet and they were able to, by talking or sharing best practices, here's what works for them. They were kind of able to help guide and direct us. And then, so we took their learnings and kind of worked with our operators. And, uh, that's how we were able to, I guess, kind of share, do some best practice sharing to help us out. So that made the journey a little bit easier for us,

Speaker 1 00:06:42 I guess, you know, what, if you didn't have to do the social distancing, it would have been very easy for somebody from that plant to fly and see you and be there on hand and say, this is how we get this done and whatever, but when you're having to do it through conference calls and things like that, it just added another layer of difficulty. I'm a

Speaker 2 00:07:01 Absolutely that was the biggest struggle because to your point, if this is what had been any other time, um, yeah, people would have been in a car driving here or flying here. Um, we could have went there and had our people work with their people, but with the COVID and everything being in lockdown, we weren't able to do that. So lot of phone calls, um, you know, our people, the 35% that was working here, we're already kind of getting used to all the COVID challenges. You know, we're taking temperatures every day, wearing masks, you know, and, and little things people don't think about, especially when working in a hot factory, cause you wear a mask, but you get out in the plant and your glasses steam up, you know? So how do you work around that? Okay, well now we need to anti-fog glasses. And I mean, it just, one thing creates another issue, which creates another, so a lot of things going on, you know, all the social distancing disinfecting we had to do, um, we, we actually purchased our own fan, um, to help disinfect, um, all kinds of, just little things that added to the complexity of this challenge.

Speaker 1 00:08:03 I'm curious to know how quickly you rolled people back into employment through this, because like you say, you got to get them reintroduced to the new process. You've got to get them used to the social distancing practices. It's not like it would have been typically where you just say, okay, everybody back to work. So how were you in that two week period able to bring everybody back or was this a bit of a longer drawn process?

Speaker 2 00:08:30 Yeah, we had a dragon out a little bit longer. It took us about two wee --

-- ks to get the first line converted. And then since then we've done two other lines. So each line takes about two weeks for us to convert. So it was basically over a six week process. Um, so, but each time we got a line coming, we'd bring, you know, a group of people back. And then to your point. So the very first thing is, you know, introducing them to all the Covance checks and, and, and, uh, changes that have come around from there. You know, social distancing. And we put yellow tape around the plan on where to people to stay in, you know, to give you the six foot. Um, we changed things to, we bought everybody radios out the plant, um, that way they can talk and communicate through the radios versus having to talk face to face.

Speaker 2 00:09:14 Um, and a lot of what we did from a disinfecting and cleaning process, we developed success cards. So we took that same concept and rolled it into COVID. Um, so every position has their own code, that success card, it's a checklist, um, different things. They've got to call you a cleaning every day or every shift. Um, which includes even, I just mentioned the radios, you know, before you do a shift transfer, you gotta just infect your radios. So all those little things, we tried building it into our process that way when the people come back, um, you know, they had a kind of a follow these instructions and made a little bit easier to kind of give them a checklist to do until, you know, again, you do it for a while and then start remembering all the changes you have to make.

Speaker 1 00:09:57 So you mentioned that it's, it's quite hot in, in your plant. Give me an a, I mean, for somebody who is not in the manufacturing industry in this way, give me a picture of, of what it looks like in the plant. So I can understand some of the safety challenges that you may face, because I know you guys have huge safety practices. So just give, paint that picture for me.

Speaker 2 00:10:21 Yeah. Just like from a heat standpoint, typically in a lot of manufacturing plants, but are specifically cause you know, these are big machines, you know, we've got, but we're melding pallets down for meaning, you know, until molten material. So as a result, we're regenerating, a lot of heats are playing is typically 15 degrees, maybe 20, depending on the days hotter than the outside. So, you know, when it's 80, 85 degrees outside, it's a hundred, 105 inside the plane. So that adds to it. And then when you say, okay, now with code that you have to wear masks, you know, it's, it's compounding the problem for that for the people. And that's something, um, you know, people have to get used to. I mean, everybody understood very little complaining. Um, everybody understands what this pandemic, you know, there's changes that have to happen, but again, it just adds to the complexity

Speaker 1 00:11:11 And the, just the, the level of heat in there. Are there best practices that you have for, for keeping an eye on people's temperatures even without COVID.

Speaker 2 00:11:22 Yes. And we do that. We talk to our people, we actually, we built a cooling rooms. So if people started getting too hot, they can walk in cool off, we supply our people free water. So they're able to take water breaks, we buy fresh fruits so they can, you know, keep trying to cool down. So we increase break frequencies. And so we're doing all that all the time. Um, you know, just from an overheating standpoint, of course, you know, taking temperatures, everybody does that when they first come in, you can't come into the plane without getting your temperature taken first, but then the day we try monitoring, you know, people's progress, we've got people walk up and down the lines, just, you know, again, just trying to, um, be as helpful as we can. And to again, it helps promote teamwork really.

Speaker 1 00:12:06 So I mentioned at the start of the podcast that you've actually brought everybody back to work and then you've now had to add, because you're so busy, you've added up to 40% to your workforce. So what's the challenge, like trying to bring new people into a brand new environment in a COVID situation and get them trained up and get them to work and find them

Speaker 2 00:12:30 To others. There's definitely, um, uh, during this time there's, uh, there's plenty of challenges. So again, yeah, you just keep adding it on. So with that growth, so as the economy started opening back up, o --

-- ur normal business came back well, on top of that, we're trying to produce all this Kovats material, so, and continuing to do that. So that's what the is resulting in the, the additional hiring. So, uh, this area, um, that we're in the Northwest Ohio typically has very low unemployment, um, pretty COVID it was like 2.7%. So it was very low. Um, of course what the COVID has spiked up. Um, so we did a lot of advertising, but we do a social media advertising doing some billboards, newspapers. Uh, we have signs posted out in the plant, um, early on a bit of a struggle, uh, toward the end of July. Um, let me just think with, uh, um, the way things were happening. Um, you know, from a government standpoint, it, it started opening up. People started coming out, um, applications. So we've now filled most of our spots. We've only got a few openings away. So, um, hiring has gotten easier in the last few weeks.

Speaker 1 00:13:40 So when you look at the big picture and we don't know how long this, this COVID thing is going to last, but you say you're seeing demand for your original products coming back, but you've converted two or three lines to making clear acrylic, um, how are you going? How do you manage it all? Like, you must have a significant growth. And I think you're operating 24 seven. So you can't add any more hours.

Speaker 2 00:14:04 Yeah. It's, it's, it's adding additional lines or learning utilization rates are really going up, um, to your point. Um, you know, right now, again, it's hard to see what's going on out in the market. We do see, um, some cancellation of orders as some school districts. So schools are a big one that we're, we're taking a lot of clerical work sheet as they shut down and go online. You know, there might be some areas canceling orders, but then we're seeing others, you know, placing new orders. So it's kind of a, a little bit of a push pull, you know, we're, we're seeing some cancellations, but then we're seeing, you know, other orders go in. So, you know, again, I know we don't know that this is ever really going to go away. Um, you know, I think with a lot of these barriers, a lot of businesses are, you know, understanding that these are good practices for half, probably even after COVID. So we think there will be an additional, um, you know, sales moving forward beyond what there was just because, you know, again, you never know when the next book pandemics going to happen. So I think a lot of businesses will continue to protect their people.

Speaker 1 00:15:08 This is probably going to be a bit of a silly question, but I'm going to ask it anyway. We've never faced anything like this before. So I'm assuming though that in your career, you've had to get creative and rethink how you do production or processes or business in the past. But how challenging was this? You must've had some sleepless nights.

Speaker 2 00:15:34 Yes. That's a, that's a good way to put it. Uh, you know, overall we are heavily into the lean concepts. So we do a lot of quick changeovers, TPM, um, just different timezone that was continuous driving, continuous improvement. Um, cause today's day and age, anybody working in manufacturing, you have to drive the improvement day in and day out. But typically it's small changes all the time. The, this, this COVID is really lead to dramatic changes. Um, you know, again, thinking outside the box, trying things you've never tried before, um, in order to survive and when done properly, you know, it's the type of thing that, again, I'm so proud of our team. I tell everybody I don't take any credit. This was all of them. The people that work here in Paulding figured this out, they did a wonderful job and as a result and we got all of our coworkers back to work and we're helping the community by providing the more jobs. And the most important part is we're protecting or producing a product. That's protecting people from this disease, you know, around the country. So in a way we're helping save lives. So that's kind of how we're looking at it. So yeah, there's, there's always some change, but nothing like we've seen in the bathroom for months.

Speaker 1 00:16:48 And so the attitude at work, people are feeling pretty positive and, uh, and the culture feels good there.

Speaker 2 00:16:55 Oh yeah. We've got a great group of people, great teams. So that part of it, the course, like anything else there's growing pains that you have when you --

-- grow this fast, this quick, um, again, we'll never say we're perfect, but, uh, we worked through problems as a, as a team or as a group, uh, we're driving the improvement every day is getting better. You've got all these new people, you know, you mentioned earlier, not only they got to learn all of the safety, um, practices that we have in place, but you know, the quality of the product, how things were learned. So there's a lot of learning going on on all four shifts. So, uh, again, it'll take us, but every, every week it's a little bit better as people gain more experience and we're looking forward to, what's going to happen over the next few weeks and few minutes,

Speaker 1 00:17:39 Certainly not going to forget 20, 20 our, we,

Speaker 2 00:17:42 This will be a happy new year when this year is over with. Exactly. So Gary, just for

Speaker 1 00:17:50 Manufacturers that are out there, you've been through this process, it's, it's been successful for you. You've learned a lot. There's still a lot of growing pains ahead. What are some key takeaways that you can leave with people or insights that you've gained for other manufacturing leaders you can share?

Speaker 2 00:18:07 The biggest thing is don't be afraid to try things. Uh, well, you know, when I first went to my team and I mentioned this clear acrylic, you know, there, I have a lot of managers that have been here, you know, 30, 40, over 45 years. And they're like, well, we've never done that. We can't do that. And so again, so the main thing is sometimes maybe even on desperation, I guess it, it makes us think things differently. So don't be afraid to try things you haven't tried before, um, push yourselves and challenge, um, each other, but again, do it as a team on what we can do differently, um, to, to spin it. So again, yeah, we went from probably one of the worst years we were going to be having as a business to now one of the best and you know, continuing to grow. And again, most importantly, it's not about the business. It's how can we help, you know, society as a whole one and help people out during this difficult time.

Speaker 1 00:18:59 Gary, it's a great story. Congratulations on your success with Spartech and congratulations to the team and Paulding, and thanks so much for sharing your story with us on make it right.

Speaker 2 00:19:10 Well, thank you very much for this opportunity. And I'm hope all is well with everyone. And hopefully we all get through this over the next couple of months and, uh, get back to a little bit of normalness. That'd be great.

Speaker 1 00:19:22 I'm with you when you said this is going to be a happy new year when we kick into 2021. So thanks again, Gary. Thank you. Gary Buckland is with Spartech. He is the senior plant manager at their plant and Paulding Ohio. That is our show this week, please check out our Twitter and LinkedIn feeds that you'll find on our podcast page. And you can subscribe and share this podcast with your friends and colleagues through iTunes, Google play, Stitcher Spotify, and YouTube The Make It Right podcast is brought to you by Kevin's Snook. He's a leadership advisor and author of the bestselling book, Make It Right. Five steps to align your manufacturing business from a front line to the bottom line. I'm Janet Eastman until next time. Thanks for listening to Make It Right.

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