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Armando Soto is a convert to the visual-workplace concept. The director of operational excellence at Albuquerque jewelry-maker Relios Inc. attended a two-day workshop this spring that was sponsored by the New Mexico Manufacturing Extension Partnership. He came away with the tools he needed to put Relios on the path to being a fully functional visual workplace.

The point of visual-workplace training, according to guest speaker Gwendolyn Galsworth, Ph.D., founder of the Visual-Lean Institute, is to “convert the physical (work) environment into a visual one” and “to share vital information about the task at hand at a glance, without speaking a word — in short, to let the workplace speak.”

Galsworth’s method uses the concept of “10 Doorways” to evaluate a company’s visual competency and to chart a path for improvement.

The 10 Doorways system attempts to remedy information deficits that stall product flow, documentation flow, and transaction flow. It does so by embedding visual answers to critical questions near the place where they’re relevant. A sign or label with words and images that impart a message — about safety, for example — eliminates the need for workers or customers to slow production by asking questions.

“We humans operate based on the exchange of information called communication — whether written, verbal, or by any other means,” Soto said. “If such information in the workplace is deficient, your process falls short in many ways. Unfortunately, information flow is the one most companies procrastinate on. Then we act based on the lack of information, incomplete (information), or inaccurate information.”

Under Soto's leadership, Relios will take its first steps toward visuality.

"In our company, we have many elements of the 10 Doorways in place, but in a random way — not under the one structure designed to support the visual workplace concept, so there is an opportunity for us there," Soto said.

Workshop participants put the new ideas into use with a visit to Desert Paper, an Albuquerque manufacturer of envelopes and paper products.

"The participants were separated into groups of four or five and first toured through our plant (with) one of our employees," said Strategic Project Manager Margeaux Anderson, who participated in the seminar with three co-workers. "Afterward, the groups set out to grade a particular area on how visual it was, or how much information you could disseminate simply by looking. Then each group presented its findings and noted which areas could use the most improvement."

Desert Paper has been a lean-manufacturing facility since 2004, Anderson said.

"A central part of our lean efforts is continuous improvement, (so) we knew that this was a tremendous opportunity to host multiple accomplished manufacturers at our facility," she said.

Soto said his team's assessment of the work environment at Desert Paper "offered opportunities for information supply to the lower levels of the organization on high-level company goals."

It also led to a relationship between Relios and Desert Paper.

"We now collaborate for the continuous improvement process by offering each advice," Soto, who had only admiration for Desert Paper, said.

“It takes pride and integrity to be willing to accept a team of unfamiliar people to come and assess your company and tell you where and how to improve,” he said. “My hat’s off to them for that!”

For more information about MEP workshops, visit newmexicomep.org.

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