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EDITORIAL BRAD F. KUVIN

Continue to Innovate—Recession or Not

I just spoke with a metalforming-plant manager who lamented how, due to the recession, his lost resources (machine operators and floor managers) simply made any sort of innovation impossible to achieve. While there's only so much time in the day and so many people to get the work done, to cease innovating in the face of the recession means sure death when the economy comes back around.

Now more than ever customers have their eyes focused keenly on you, their suppliers, to see where the ideas and innovations will come from that will allow them to meet their own goals when business picks up. Suppliers must be positioned to reduce their customers' time to market and have the flexibility to quickly and efficiently take on new products and designs.

I'm certain that your company, like most others, is full of "idea killers"—folks that have more than enough excuses to not focus on any tasks other than those required to get product out the door. But I'm equally certain that your company also has employees that are creative and innovative enough to develop sustainable ideas to propel you to the top of your customers' minds when it comes time for them to rank their suppliers.

It's time for metalforming-company CEOs and top managers to empower those thought leaders within their companies to help take them to the next level of innovation. The needs of your customers and the marketplaces you serve—or hope to someday serve—are evolving far too quickly for you to stop innovating simply due to recessionary pressures.

One piece of advice I can offer is for metalforming-company managers to spend more time walking their shop

floor, to not only develop and maintain morale but to also identify the thought leaders and to learn from them. I read an article recently arguing that owners (and other managers) need to get their employees to think like owners, because "empowering employees leads to higher productivity, quality and morale." While I see the value there and appreciate the importance of empowerment, I also believe that managers (even owners) can take some cues from their employees—perhaps more often than vice versa.

Here's why. When I visit metalforming shops and have the privilege of speaking with the folks on the shop floor, without fail I come away impressed with their overall character, knowledge and creativity, particularly those who have been with the company for awhile. And, many of you have employees with 15, 20, even 25 years or more at the press control. These folks exhibit traits that any manager should strive to attain—they lead by example, take responsibility for their work, immediately seek solutions to problems, listen to the suggestions of others, welcome opportunities to take on new responsibilities and grow, and they show loyalty to their company.

These are the attributes that should allow any manufacturer to continue to innovate, regardless of the state of the economy. Show some guts and develop the stamina to make it happen.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Brad F. Kuvin". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

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