

Case Study

Air Lift Company

Location: Lansing, MI

2017 Revenues: \$50.7 million

Employees: 142

Highlights

Rapid Financial Results; Lasting Cultural Change

Starting in the 1980s, the family decided to bring in a professional management team to help scale the company's market beyond its enthusiast roots. "Part of that cultural shift involved a new emphasis on measuring things in the business and paying attention to the financials," says Kevin Mehigh, Air Lift's president, who joined the company in 2000.

Air Lift was fortunate to experience some rapid growth in the past six years – with revenue growing by 163% and income increasing by 200%– but that knowledge was limited mostly to senior leaders until 2014, when Mehigh and his team made the decision to open the books and begin playing the Great Game of Business.

Mehigh says that by playing Great Game of Business, they have added a deeper level of understanding and investment among frontline employees that was not there before.

Thanks to a schedule of weekly huddles and scoreboard updates, coupled with regular financial literacy training, Air Lift employees now have access to a line of sight into how they impact where the business is going like never before.

"We are now much more of a sharing company than we have ever been," says Mehigh. "Shame on us for not giving everyone in the business the feeling like they had a voice. I guess I never appreciated the level of intelligence that exists in the people and the creativity of their ideas and contributions. Thanks to the Great Game of Business, we are now trying to push the decision making to where the knowledge is."



Organizational Background

Claude Pemberton, who was interested in developing dependable air helper spring suspension products, founded Air Lift Company back in 1949. Today, Air Lift's products are sold worldwide and are designed to fit more than 540 vehicles, ranging from trucks and vans to SUVs and RVs.

"The Great Game of Business has really helped us create a fun working environment and also bridge the gap between blue collar and white collar."

*~ Dale Ward,
Director of Operations*

Playing the Game Together

After opening their books, the Air Lift team found early success in playing Mini-Games. At the same time, they struggled to some degree with finding specific metrics for the department huddles. The teams decided to focus on a single question: “How does our department support the critical number?” Before long they had come up with several metrics that they could all support.

In addition, they found that the process of working through how to identify those metrics brought the team closer together.

So has the huddling process, which includes regular updates on the company’s gainshare payout, as well as the opportunity for all employees to ask questions – and get answers.

“I recently walked by a huddle during our second shift and they were talking financial numbers,” says Mehigh. “Even our executives weren’t doing that just 10 years ago.”

Air Lift has also introduced collaborative cross-departmental sharing during their HIP process, which has included building more awareness around the company’s SWOT (Strengths-Weaknesses-Opportunities-Threats) status.

“I am proud of the silos that are breaking down, and how we have more collaboration as we align our efforts to support each other and work together.”

~ Larry Finney, Supply Chain Manager

What’s Next?

Air Lift has taken a “crawl before they walk” approach to implementing the Great Game of Business, which means some parts of the company are not yet fully invested in the game. Mehigh plans to change that.

But he’s also interested in getting everyone inside the business thinking beyond today and focusing more on two to three years down the road – something that he thinks the HIP process will help bring about. “We want to get more people working on the business, rather than in the business,” says Mehigh.

“It is refreshing to walk into an organization everyday where you don’t have to be afraid to share your ideas, and actually have them heard all the way to the President of our organization.”

~ Rob Lisk, Manufacturing Engineering Manager