

A STRATEGY FOR SUCCESS

CULTURE & STRATEGY: THE EQUATION FOR INNOVATION AT EPL

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Plastic manufacturing is a tough industry to be in, and with 40 years in the business no one knows it better than [EPL \(Elastomer Products Ltd\)](#).

Yet, despite industry challenges of changing consumer behaviours and a steady move to take manufacturing offshore, they’ve persevered and flourished to be one of Australasia’s top polymer and rubber extrusion companies. How?

For them, it was a matter of cementing their strategy and building the culture to drive it. The result? Innovation abounds.

ABOUT EPL

EPL has been in the plastic manufacturing business since 1974. Their custom-designed products are used in construction, appliances, electronics, marine, medical and many more applications. With manufacturing operations in Christchurch and Amata City, Thailand, and an additional office in Auckland, EPL is fast becoming a global company.

THE CHALLENGES

Competing in a globalised market

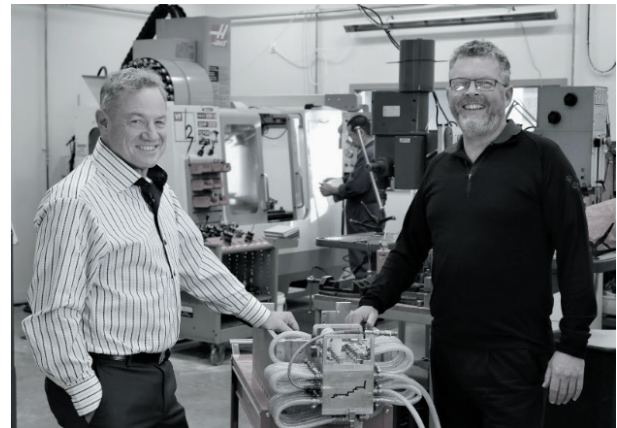
With the growing globalised market, New Zealand manufacturers are getting priced out of their own backyard. To compete, more and more Kiwi manufacturers are choosing to take their business offshore. When two of EPL’s major customers, Fisher & Paykel and Electrolux, shifted to Thailand in 2009,

EPL decided to establish a new Thailand branch too, but also keep its New Zealand doors open.

Staying relevant in a period of change

New technologies and innovations have the potential to rewrite the manufacturing industry. To stay on top of these advances and the offshore shift, EPL needed to develop an innovative workplace capable of adapting to new technologies and changing business models.

Leadership succession



Tom Thomson (left) and Mark Field (right)

One of the most significant challenges for EPL came in the form of changing company leadership. In early 2016, EPL’s Managing Director, Tom Thomson, handed the reigns over to his successor, CEO, Mark Field.

THE SOLUTION

Investment in leaders

The change began with EPL’s leaders. And as Mark Field became CEO, he undertook mentorship with Advisory.Works via their Strategy Execution Programme. Both Tom and Mark worked with coaches to gain clarity in their new roles

and the expectations of governance and CEO leadership roles. This also gave Tom the confidence to give Mark the space and opportunity to lead the business. With the help of Advisory.Works, Tom and Mark developed a set of behavioural core values and a documented strategy to guide the business forward.

Another key to their successful succession was to have a strategic plan that not only Tom and Mark were aligned to, but for the whole business.

"It was great having a plan and meaningful measures to work to when I took on the CEO role," Mark says. "Now we've got other managers working with Advisory.Works on an adhoc basis to address particular needs when they arise."

Measuring what matters

Under Advisory.Works guidance, Mark and the EPL leadership team refined their KPIs to reflect useful and meaningful measures.

"We didn't have many meaningful KPIs before," says Mark. "Now we report on measures we deem as really important: innovations, near misses in health and safety, reduction of waste and absenteeism, among others."

3000 innovations by 2026

With a new core value of 'Innovation Sets Us Apart', Mark and the leadership team set themselves an ambitious goal: achieve 3,000 innovations by 2026.

"That first year was about setting the goal and finding a simple process to track it," Mark says. "It had to be simple or it wouldn't gain any traction."

The solution? A simple wall and Post-It notes. One year later, they had 133 ideas stuck to it. After another six months an additional 63 ideas. With the opportunity to give opinions and contribute towards the company's innovation goal, staff performance and engagement is on the rise—along with EPL's growing team culture.

Understanding what makes staff tick

As part of their commitment to change and grow, EPL also started surveying their staff to gauge how employees felt about the business and its culture.

In addition to the normal engagement survey questions, "We ask a simple set of questions," says Mark. "What makes you sad? What makes you glad? What makes you mad? It was very interesting to find out what those were after our first survey, and there were common themes that ran right the way through."

THE RESULTS

Clarity for EPL leadership

"Before we engaged with Advisory.Works, we didn't have a strategic plan documented," says Mark. "But in going through that process, we saw the difference within weeks. Attitudes changed because we suddenly knew where we were going."



CASE STUDY: EPL

"Having a plan and knowing someone is going to be checking up on it in three months time made us accountable," Mark says. EPL also limited the number of strategic actions to three or four tasks per person to ensure all the actions were not just completed, but done to a higher level.

"Since we've been measuring the things that are critical to us, we've been seeing improvements in those KPIs as well," says Mark. "Measuring those key things and setting action plans around improving them has made a big impact."

Innovation on the rise

With 196 innovations and counting on the wall, EPL is not only encouraging new ideas but also improving efficiencies with their business, leading to a more productive and positive environment.

"Most of the ideas are about improving the workplace," Mark says. "Having core values such as 'Innovation Sets Us Apart', 'One Team' and 'Making a Positive Difference', means that no idea gets pushed aside or ridiculed. And every now and then a really good one comes through.

"We've had two or three great ones so far, one of which will probably have an impact of \$150,000 on our bottom line, if not more."

Big gains in staff satisfaction

The staff surveys have been another area of remarkable change for EPL. Mark admits that some of the information they got back in the first survey was pretty brutal, but it was the first step towards change.

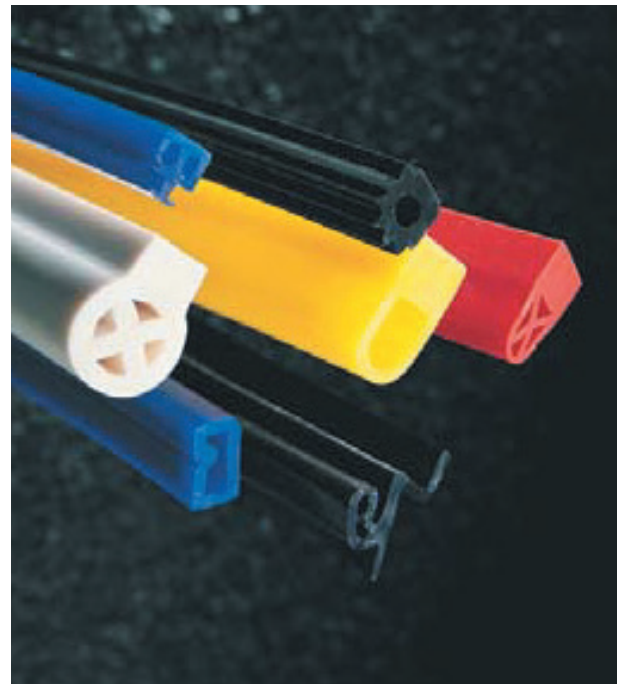
"The things that made people glad we did more of," he says. "And the interesting thing was that the things that made people sad or mad in the first survey became the things that made them glad in the second, once we had tackled some of the issues."

SUMMARY

With the help of Advisory.Works, EPL has transformed their workplace for the better. With the foundations of a high-performance, innovative and positive culture in place, they are uniting behind a common goal that is serving to focus the business and drive it forward.

"I would recommend Advisory.Works to other businesses in a similar situation to us—in fact, I already have," Mark says. "I see a lot of businesses like ours. They have really hard working people, but each person has slightly different priorities and views of what the future of the company will look like, so they're not necessarily going in the same direction.

"Working with Advisory.Works gets you focused, their feedback is constructive and they're not just advising you on where to go, but also how to get there."



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READY TO LEARN MORE?

With the right coaching and advice, you too can have a culture that brings out the best in people and drives your business forward. The Advisory.Works team has helped businesses all over New Zealand establish and grow their workplace cultures and maximise their performance.

And that's just the start!

*Book a free coffee
catch up.*

