



Time for Reflection in Between Cycles

## Smart Molding in America

**G**VL, Inc. and Persico SpA have combined to bring the latest machine and process technology in the form of their new Smart machines to the US. Recently installed in their latest facility in Kansas, the target at GVL is for products with high-specification and moderate to high volume production runs. The opportunity of higher levels of process control and quality opens the path to all sorts of new applications.

### Hard & Soft Rotomolding

I'm not talking about nylon & EVA. I'm talking about the comparison between technical aspects of the process versus the less

defined aspects of rotomolding, those that deal with the human perspective. The reality is that there is often a clear answer for technical, material or mechanical issues but answers related to people can lie along a continuum, one that is often moving constantly.

I recall a few years ago, happily sharing details of progress that we had made back at Remcon Plastics with an old friend, John Cali. How the plant was running well, cycles were up and scrap was down. John was an old-hand at this game having run a number of plants over many years and his simple comment brought all that experience to bear: "Enjoy it while it lasts", captured the fragile nature of teams, factory politics, incentives, human emotions and all the other aspects of a living,



breathing operation. We could readily set-up machines to run under optimum conditions – maintaining a team that keeps it that way over an extended period can prove challenging for any molder.

Anyone who has worked in a rotomolding operation knows this story. There are many aspects of the process which are 'hard' in the sense that they have a defined or technical solution. In my travels, the most common that molders face or implement are process control, understanding release agent, mold care and balancing production flow. However, there are even more aspects of running an operation which deal with the 'soft' side of rotomolding – the human aspects. Rarely is there a single defined answer to a situation – managers must make decisions based on many subtle and often changeable factors. Cultural factors, language, staff ability, long-term relationships and mood/morale are all background issues which they must take into consideration. Even when they make what appears to be the right call for one group, they risk offending another. It's not easy.

While consultants are often called upon to address the hard issues and provide specific answers to specific problems, we do see the softer aspects as a natural course of our work. It does not take long when visiting an operation to see the 'mind of the manager' at work: the demeanor of

the people; layout of the floor; condition of equipment; general cleanliness and approach to safety quickly inform as to the strength of leadership and style of management (or lack of) that is in place.

There are common issues faced by molders all over the world - high staff turnover, low productivity, high scrap and low morale. While staff attitude will have an effect on all of these, there may be other underlying issues which are not immediately obvious. Low wages are often cited for high turnover but working conditions (hot) and, more often, poor supervision can be to blame. Low productivity and high scrap can be due to lack of attention but training and support systems may be missing – perhaps weak supervision again.

The approach to solving these issues will be fashioned after the local culture: Asians may adopt a non-confrontational approach, Scandinavians may be reserved, Americans can be outspoken while in the Middle East what is unspoken may be most important. The approach will also be affected by the style of manager involved, ranging from micro-managers to interfering bosses to supportive motivators. In my experience, managers who are involved, listen to their people and make them feel respected see better productivity and morale.

At the end of the day, while we need to solve technical problems, paying attention to soft issues will often be more important than making sure there are solutions to the hard issues. People will work even under the most

difficult conditions if they feel supported and appreciated but you will never run a system if your people don't come to work. And while your operators are important, don't forget those hard-pressed supervisors and middle managers. They can often find themselves in no-man's land squeezed between temperamental owners, surly staff and demanding customers!

**Post Script:** I was sad to hear about the passing of John Cali after I had written this article. John was one of the legends of rotomolding and someone that I felt honored to know. He always had time and always had a story to tell. He was a gentleman farmer raising cattle on his homestead and a gentleman in all aspects of his life. We will miss him. **R**



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