

BioFit Engineered Products

Contributed by Chris Petersen

BioFit Engineered Products was busy worrying about its day-to-day chores before implementing a new process that helps it stay focused on the future. By Chris Petersen

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In the 1960s and 1970s, BioFit Engineered Products led the way by introducing a line of ergonomic chairs for the industrial and laboratory markets. These chairs included features such as adjustability, lumbar support and specially designed seats to fit the user's body as perfectly as possible. The company became a success, President Ed Metzger says, but had yet to find a long-range plan that suited it. With the implementation of a system known as Six Disciplines, however, BioFit has found a strategy for success that fits it as comfortably as one of its chairs.

Before Six Disciplines, Metzger says, the company was successful, but not living up to its potential. "Like many small- to mid-sized companies, our hearts were in the right places, but we were simply distracted by our day-to-day duties and allegiance to customer needs to make much headway toward these departmental and corporate goals," he says. "As a result, our progress was slow and spotty. Our company never had long-term growth plans or strategies."

The company began looking for ways to improve its goal-setting and found one in the form of Six Disciplines and its president, Eric Kurjan. Kurjan and Metzger had met before while Metzger was in graduate school, and Kurjan says he helped Metzger and BioFit not only develop a long-range plan for the company's future, but also plans to stick to it.

"Ed and the BioFit organization, unfortunately, are typical in that everyone has the best intentions, but there's just not enough time in the day to get things done," Kurjan says. "We liken it to any diet, fitness program, etc. — you know what you have to do, you just don't do it."

BioFit and Kurjan held a strategic planning retreat where the company's goals for the next 10 years were mapped out. With the help of a Six Disciplines coach, BioFit broke down those goals into smaller objectives, developing yearly, quarterly and even weekly goals. "For the first time in their lives, they feel that they have a very well-defined plan," Kurjan says.

Three-Prong Strategy

Kurjan says the Six Disciplines program highlights communication, accountability, engagement, alignment, control and transition, all of which are necessary to ensure that companies stay focused on their long-term goals without becoming bogged down in day-to-day chores. He says companies implement these through a three-pronged approach.

The first prong is the process, which Kurjan likens to a blueprint or schematic. "You don't just go out into the shop and build something; you have to have a plan," he says. The second prong is coaching, which is provided by a Six Disciplines coach. Kurjan says the coaching is necessary to create a sense of accountability in managers and executives and to keep them on-task.

"They say it's lonely at the top," Kurjan says. "When Ed has questions, who does he turn to?" The third prong of the plan is the software, which keeps track of the elements from the other portions of the system and makes them accessible across the entire organization.

Fast Results

BioFit saw improvements in its operations relatively quickly, Metzger reports. "It was [by] about one quarter or within the first quarter when I noticed improvements, especially among the managers with more of a laid-back style," he says.

Most significant has been the improvement in communication between upper management and workers on the floor, Metzger adds. In the past, the company never took the time to detail its ongoing strategies and goals with its people on the floor, which made it difficult to motivate them. "Now, we're finding that taking the time to communicate made a huge difference on the factory floor with the buy-in," Metzger says.

Under the Six Disciplines system, Metzger says, managers report to him on a weekly basis to give updates on how closely they are meeting weekly goals. From there, Metzger gives updates to Kurjan. "It really helps things stay on track; it's really a great system," Metzger says.

That's not to say that getting in the habit of communicating was easy at first. Kurjan says there were a few conversations he had with Metzger where Metzger wanted to forego the regular communication meetings with employees because they weren't getting into the swing of things right away. However, Metzger says, he thought back to his days as a student teacher. "This is just a parallel of that experience," he says, adding that he realized the employees, like his students, would eventually catch on if he just stuck with it.

The results of BioFit's experience with Six Disciplines speak for themselves, Metzger says. "In one year of using the Six Disciplines process, we have successfully launched two new products, completed two major capital equipment investment projects in manufacturing automation equipment and made numerous other steps forward in meeting our corporate objectives," he says.

However, he adds, BioFit has not yet reached the full potential of the process, but won't be adding onto its Six Disciplines infrastructure yet. "There's still room for us to improve," he says. "For right now, we're leaving it where it is because the software is very sophisticated and we'd like to be able to be more capable of using the software before we go down to the next level and have more people using it."

A Finer Focus

The implementation of Six Disciplines at the company has allowed BioFit to hone its product line to specific markets and develop new products. "With the help of our Six Disciplines consulting firm, our management staff has zeroed in on key markets we are targeting for new product development," Metzger says.

One such innovation is the ArmorSeat, which was developed for wet labs in the R&D and biotechnology sectors. BioFit's new 10-year plan includes more innovations to come. "This past year, we also developed a line of vacuum-formed vinyl seating products targeted to the healthcare and laboratory markets," Metzger says.

Specific Products

BioFit has manufactured chairs and other seating options for industrial and educational applications for more than half a century. The Ohio-based company was founded in 1946, and specialized in developing products specifically for certain environments. Today, the company is divided into two main divisions, and although they sound like the simplest products imaginable, the varied sectors BioFit works for requires a lot of specialized experience. The seating division produces chairs and stools for a variety of applications, and Metzger says customers turn to BioFit because of its strengths.

"We are known for the durability of our products, especially for use in blue-collar applications, as well as technical applications such as laboratories and the healthcare market," he says. Metzger says BioFit has incorporated numerous innovative and proprietary technologies.

"BioFit's other division is a fairly recent addition," Metzger says. In 2000, the company was asked by a client to create a line of folding cafeteria tables for the K-12 educational and hospitality markets.

Strong For the Future

Customer service is one of BioFit's hallmarks, Metzger says. "Our commitment to service is demonstrated by the inclusion of a full-time customer service manager who oversees our quality of service and assures proper training of service personnel," he says. "Our gold standard is for same-day callbacks at the latest and most customer requests are answered and satisfied on their first call to our service staff at the time the call is made."

Metzger says BioFit's reputation, combined with the added strength it has received from the Six Disciplines process, will give it the boost it needs to survive the rough times. "We're looking at a really challenging time right now, and one of the things we're trying to do in our marketing message is tell our customers that we have been, and continue to be, a rock in the marketplace," he says.

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