Where saying ‘yes’ to employee ideas is part of the plan

"Respect our neighbors, drive slowly," reads the sign by the exit to the parking lot at the LFV/Landscape Forms.

The 85-employee company's 100,000-square-foot plant is quietly tucked among the trees at the end of a residential street on East Michigan Avenue in Comstock Township. While the company is not well-known in this area, General Manager Bill Main said it has a profitable niche and a national reputation for public space furniture — the benches people sit in after a long walk in the park or some power shopping at the mall.

The customers for these products are some of the biggest corporations, developers, municipalities and universities across the nation. They are willing to pay handsome prices, but they demand exquisite styling and the type of durable workmanship that will stand up to constant abuse.

Landscape Forms management can target the market, but they need their workforce to produce the quality products.

Their main tool is the techniques of Joseph Scanlon, a steelworker-turned-management-lecturer who specialized in methods to foster employee involvement and productivity. Scanlon management techniques are also used at well-known firms such as Herman Miller, Donnelly and Motorola.

At this firm, Scanlon means every employee's ideas are taken seriously, said Janis Etzcorn, marketing communications supervisor.

Every written suggestion goes before a committee of workers and management. If the idea makes sense it is quickly implemented.

"The philosophy is to say 'yes' to as many suggestions as possible," she said.

Recent suggestion-generated changes range from paper rather than cloth towels in the rest rooms for health reasons to buying a new water-jet saw in the shop to improve cutting efficiency. A bell was placed inside the plant door so new orders can be symbolically announced and a cafeteria employee benefit plan was introduced.

If an idea is rejected, the employee who made the suggestions gets an explanation of the decision. In addition to getting a clear and personal response, Etzcorn said explaining a rejection can help educate the workers on how things are done there and why.

"Everybody is expected to participate," Etzcorn said. "You’re not expected to just do your job and shut up."

An afternoon visit to Landscape Forms did seem to reveal an atmosphere of honest communication. There are no time clocks. The workspaces are open, with lots of wood-framed windows. The dress code is casual.

"You can't wear a tie here without getting accosted," Main said.

The latest challenge has been adding "team" concepts onto the Scanlon system. The aim is to save costs by reducing inventories through a "just-in-time" system.

"Change is very difficult, even in a Scanlon company," Main said.

Overall, the company has come a long way since John Chipman Sr. started it in 1969 as a way to provide winter employment for his landscaping crews. It's worked so well Chipman dropped the landscaping side of the business and last year sales at the firm he owns reached about $10 million, despite the recession.

The first quarter was slow and the company lost money, Main said, but orders have picked up strongly in March and April.

No one has to suggest the benefits of a return to profitability. The employees see the results through their profit-sharing plan.