

ES Solutions @ Kleysen Transport

A WEM partnership case study

When WEM clarified the ways Essential Skills levels can affect workplace performance, management at Kleysen Transport realized that previously-unattributed issues might be Essential Skills-based. After a WEM needs assessments confirmed the need for specific gap training – which was delivered – the company then enjoyed a second revelation: workers performing with appropriate ES levels require a whole different style of supervision, management and leadership. That’s when management decided it was time to develop a whole new vision.

Winnipeg’s Kleysen Transport has come a long way since it first hit the road in 1935 as a family-owned cartage company at the height of the Depression. Now employing 500 people across Canada, the company is a diversified national carrier and logistics firm that specializes in bulk, flatdeck, multi-commodity transload and intermodal services. From 2000 to 2006 the company that bills itself “The Transportation Solutions Company” more than doubled its revenue -- from \$45 million to over \$100 million – before eventually being sold to the Mullen Group.

As Kleysen’s exceptional growth began leveling off and divisional mergers, expansions and stream-lining occurred, the impact of years of continuous change began taking their toll on workforce cohesion and productivity. Explains Human Resources Manager Christiane Devlin: “It’s not enough to come in and just process paper. People need to understand their contribution and the impact their decisions have on the greater good. And sometimes there’s a gap in terms of skills and abilities, knowledge, decision-making ability, problem-solving, etc., and then you have to say well how do we bridge that gap?”

It was at that same time that Devlin received an awareness-raising call from WEM that piqued her curiosity. At the subsequent meeting, she remembers, the impact and clarity that came to her as she began to think of the Kleysen workforce in terms of their Essential Skills was near-instantaneous. Thinking skills, problem-solving, document use, computer use, oral communication, working with others: she could see them all as being critical building blocks in comprehending and participating in the Kleysen big picture.

“When I met with WEM the first time,” remembers Devlin, “what I realized is that if you look at the nine Essential Skills it’s possible to say ‘Well, how do we know that everybody knows, for example, exactly all of what a document *means*? Sure, maybe everybody can process it, but do they understand what it means as far as what we do or how we do it or *why* we do it? If you’re a Dispatcher and you’re looking at a document on your screen - how does it fit into the bigger picture and what’s the impact? Essential Skills broke it down for us into its most basic components: they broke it down into bite-sized, manageable pieces.” And so the partnership began.

The business case for training got swift and positive approval from executives when they heard it would be customized to the Kleysen culture, held on-site for an hour or two at a time and be created entirely from Kleysen-specific processes, materials and objectives. “We developed it so that people in Accounting or a Dispatcher or Customer Service or somebody in Recruitment or Administration: they could all participate,” says Devlin.

“We said let’s start off small, make sure it’s relevant and valuable, create success, get as many people through as we can, get the feedback and build from there. And we did.”

Over the next few months the training moved ahead as the partners planned, with Devlin calling it an overall success for both the intended AND unintended outcomes. With a smile she explains that there have been less errors in scheduling observed and managers are reporting a notable increase in teamwork, with dispatchers offering more help to drivers and vice versa. Managers also say they’re having to spend less time refereeing problems, and a decline in customer service complaints suggests issues are being resolved at the appropriate levels.

And as the Kleysen employees became more knowledgeable about Essential Skills, as well as their tasks and how to perform them, they began providing feedback.

“We’re very fortunate in this operation to have a very large and loyal and long-serving group,” says Devlin thoughtfully. “And one of the things we got out of the training was people told us ‘you can give us communication skills and thinking skills and problem-solving skills, etc., but what we’re missing is: we know where we came from but we don’t know where we’re going next.’ That feedback was *very* important to us.”

In fact, the extraordinary nature of that response prompted another call for clarity – this time from the executive group itself. To develop that new and forward-thinking vision, they wisely reasoned, the first order of business would be to get an up-to-date picture of the now-enhanced skills and capabilities of the employees. “We thought we would start with the employees and move up,” notes Devlin, “but we’ve changed the strategy a bit. We’re going to develop executive training first and then have that content filter down.”

And while Kleysen executives acquire the knowledge and skills needed to better-focus employees’ efforts, Devlin wants to maintain the positive energy and momentum for the employees themselves. “The training was a good refresher but it wasn’t enough, so at the same time as we do the Leadership piece we’d like to do some Essential Skills-based computer training to support better customer care.”

Devlin says she can’t over-emphasize the value of Essential Skills and Kleysen’s partnership with WEM. “We very much see this as a continuum of education, with Essential Skills, where we’ll continue to build. Really, it’s been the kind of experience where it’s almost been too good to be true. The Essential Skills language is helping create a foundation for training. They’re part of every job and they’re how we can talk about the skill requirements of the job. Without WEM,” she declares, “we’d never have been able to pull it off.”