



distinctions

DISTINCTIONS | EXECUTIVE CASE STUDY

Making Transformation Human

What the Freudenberg-NOK journey reveals about leadership, people and sustained change.

Transformation may begin with a new strategy, process or operating system. But making it real requires people to understand it, participate in it and ultimately change how they work together. The Freudenberg-NOK story is a powerful example of what happens when operational discipline and human capability develop together.

THE COMPANY AND THE TRANSFORMATION

Formed in 1989, Freudenberg-NOK brought together Germany's Freudenberg and Japan's NOK in a major North American manufacturing partnership headquartered in Plymouth, Michigan. The company became a leader in precision sealing technologies serving automotive and other demanding industrial markets.

In the early 1990s, facing substantial operating losses, CEO Joseph Day began studying the Toyota Production System. In 1992 the organization introduced GROWTTH - Get Rid of Waste Through Team Harmony - and built a disciplined continuous-improvement system around Kaizen and lean practices.

Distinctions began working with Freudenberg-NOK during the broader transformation in the 1990s - first at the executive leadership level with Joe Day and Sharon Wenzl, and then increasingly throughout the operating organization across plants, shifts and levels of leadership.

FREUDENBERG-NOK

**German-Japanese
manufacturing partnership**

CASE AT A GLANCE

Established in U.S. | 1989
GROWTTH launched | 1992
Six Sigma added | 2000
Headquarters | Plymouth,
Michigan

*"The process may be
standardized. The human
experience of it never is."*

- LEO M. TONKIN

Founder & Principal, Distinctions, Inc.

Go where the work happens.

A transformation can be clear to the person leading it long before it is clear to everyone being asked to carry it forward.

Distinctions was embedded with CEO Joseph Day and the executive leadership team as the organization was setting the vision for what would become the next phase of its improvement journey.

This was still early in the broader adoption of Six Sigma. The methodology was rigorous; what it would mean in practice - for leaders, plants, teams and employees - still had to be understood and translated into the way the organization worked.

That is where change moves beyond methodology. A leadership vision has to become understandable, relevant and actionable for the people who will carry it forward.

THE NEXT PHASE

2000

SIX SIGMA ENTERS THE NEXT PHASE OF GROWTH

15,000+

KAIZENS COMPLETED BY THIS POINT IN THE TRANSFORMATION

New systems do not become real because they are announced. People have to understand them, see how they connect to their work and develop the capability to operate differently.

Distinctions worked across plants, shifts and organizational levels - with plant managers, supervisors, team leads and employees - supporting communication, perspective shifts, relationships and participation as new practices took hold.

CHANGE MANAGEMENT × TRANSFORMATION

Change management helps people move from what is to what is *next*.

Transformation develops the capacity to keep moving.

THE DISTINCTION

The challenge was not simply introducing another improvement method. It was helping an organization translate leadership intent into understanding, participation and new ways of working - then building the capability to continue improving.

The people side was embedded in the operating system's name.

GET RID OF WASTE

The operating discipline

Lean • Kaizen • Six Sigma

Quality • Measurement • Rigor • Efficiency

The methods brought discipline to finding variation, defects and waste - then improving the work through measurement, experimentation and learning.

THROUGH TEAM HARMONY

The human capability

Leadership • Relationships • Trust

Communication • Participation • Effectiveness

The human side shaped whether people understood the change, contributed what they could see, worked across boundaries and kept improving together.

Sustained transformation requires both.

Operating discipline and human capability - different dimensions of the same work.

LOOKING BEYOND THE PROCESS

Spending time across plants and shifts changed what became visible. The process could be mapped, measured and improved. But there was another experience alongside it: the experience of the people doing the work.

Employees arrived at different hours, worked different shifts and often performed highly repetitive work day after day. Being close to that work created perspective - and respect.

EFFICIENCY × EFFECTIVENESS

Efficiency improves how the work gets done - with less waste, variation and friction.

Effectiveness is the ability to accomplish what matters.

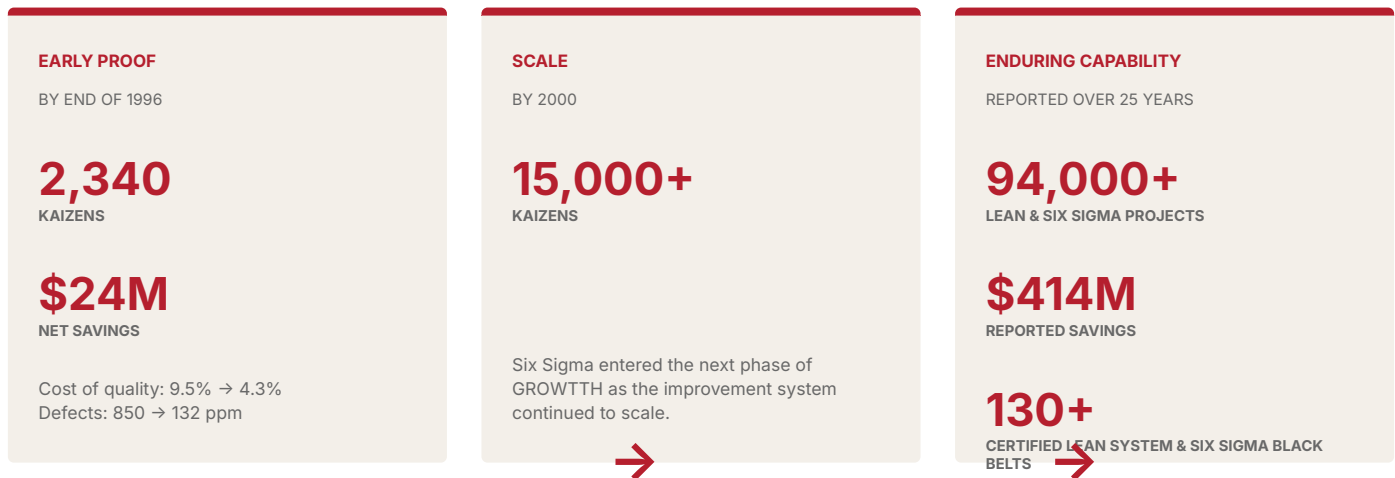
Sustainable performance requires both: rigor in the work and people able to learn, adapt and move forward together.

THE DISTINCTION

GROWTTH's last three words - Through Team Harmony - captured something essential. Lasting improvement depends not only on the discipline of the operating system, but on the ability of people to work, learn and improve together.

When continuous improvement becomes an organizational capability.

The early results were proof. The larger story is what happened as the capability endured, evolved and became part of how the organization continued to improve.



The performance evidence belongs to Freudenberg-NOK's broader transformation. Distinctions was one contributor within that larger system, focused most directly on leadership, relationships and the people side of change.

The enduring result was larger than any single project. The organization developed the capacity to keep questioning, learning, adapting and improving - rather than treating change as a one-time event.

THE DISTINCTION

Operational transformation is ultimately human transformation.

Processes can be improved. Systems can be redesigned. Tools can be taught. Sustained transformation depends on people who can question, learn, collaborate and adapt.

WHAT ARE YOU WORKING TO CHANGE?

The challenge may be operational. The work of making it real is almost always human.

START A CONVERSATION

Leo@DistinctionsInc.com