

# A Window of Opportunity

CMI helps Millwork firm create new doors to strategic growth ... rising profits

## McIlwee before CMI

For a manufacturer of windows, J.J. McIlwee Company was having trouble knowing, strategically, which way to look.

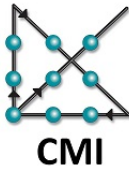


J.J. McIlwee Company of Itasca, Ill., builds and distributes custom-milled windows, doors, and moldings for architects, builders, and developers. The high-tech machinery it uses today is a far cry from the hammers and handsaws used when John J. McIlwee (Jack) started the business in 1963. When it's present owners (Jack's sons Brian, Peter, and Tom) took control in 2000, they found themselves overworked and stretched to the breaking point.

"My brothers and I had taken over where our father had left off," explained company president, Brian McIlwee. "However, dad was still around and keeping an eye on things, so we felt obliged to honor his opinions, even when they didn't gel with ours. We had a difficult time defining our own methods and, as a result, we'd developed a lot of ineffective, costly habits."

"On top of this, my brothers and I had a perverse sense of management and ownership responsibility, had trouble distinguishing between the two and, as a result, became a highly dysfunctional team. By allowing management and ownership issues to overlap, we were stifling our ability to progress and grow."

By trying to do too much of everything themselves, Brian, Peter, and Tom were taking two steps back for each step forward. There was little sense of focus or direction.



“We were wasting too much time and energy fighting small day-to-day fires and not enough time planning a strategy for tomorrow,” said McIlwee. “We were isolating our employees from all decision making. We were in a rut and had to get out of it, but we just didn’t know how.”

### **Timely Intervention**

When CMI arrived on the scene in March 2005, sales had been on the decline for two consecutive years. They were continuing their downward slide into the first quarter of that year.

“We do a lot of work with companies that find themselves in a similar position to J.J. McIlwee,” said Bruce Hodes, CMI founder and CEO. “We specialize in breakthrough business planning. We help clients get out of this kind of condition.”

CMI did not treat the McIlwees with kid gloves. Hodes challenges his clients and asks a lot of them. It is a dynamic intervention that raises critical issues. As Hodes saw it, J.J. McIlwee had to wrestle with *three* major problem areas:

### **McIlwee’s Issues**

One was their management. The three brothers were not operating as a team and thus, were struggling to improve the company’s overall performance. The company lacked a high-performance and focused leadership group.

Two, there was a lack of collaboration – person to person; department to department; throughout the company. Employees were not playing the same game or performing well together. The firm *had* to become better aligned and better focused.

Three, the company was floundering with the implementation of a new software system and IT upgrade. Their website was poorly maintained and ineffectively displaying their products and services. It was like a brick and mortar shop with ... well ... dirty, old windows.



## **The work**

Bruce met with the brothers and had them create a *Leadership Team* consisting of themselves and five key employees (production, shipping, credit managers, a salesman, and a newly designated Office Manager) – people whom the brothers felt had the necessary ambition and commitment to drive the company forward.

This team was challenged to assess its own role as a high-performance group by clarifying roles and accountabilities, analyzing accomplishments and disappointments, stating goals and objectives for that current year, creating a Mission/Vision statement, and creating a long-range strategy for the Company.

This kicked up a real dust storm and a lot of issues. Thankfully, CMI Teamwork was there to guide them through.

## **Huddles ain't cuddles**

CMI scheduled a series of one-day “Huddles” – quarterly *Leadership Team* meetings to assess the company’s standing in relation to its newly stated goals and objectives. Huddles also provided an opportunity to develop any additional plans needed to meet changing circumstances.

A host of significant issues were defined here, among them: how to implement new software, how to improve delivery, how to better define McIlwee’s organizational structure, design of a customer service strategy, and how McIlwee should define its “brand” and differentiation strategy. Leadership Team members each took ownership of one to five of these issues.

With this ownership came responsibility for creating what CMI calls a *White Paper* (a tool designed to stimulate dialog, air viewpoints, and create a sense of commitment and direction around each issue). “At subsequent Huddles, we’d return with our White Papers and lists of suggestions,” said Brian McIlwee. “As a group, we’d discuss each of these papers, assessing the



strengths and weaknesses of each topic, decide what we wanted to work on – HR, IT, marketing, you name it, it ran the gamut -- and then create appropriate action plans.”

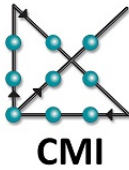
By the end of the second Huddle, the *Leadership Team* was starting to draw a clear picture of what needed to be completed by the end of the year. “Through applying itself to the White Papers and by making courage and candor an active guest at each quarterly Huddle, the *Leadership Team* was beginning to take real strides and gain some significant ground,” said Hodes.

By the end of 2005, J.J. McIlwee had made immense breakthroughs, including a name change to McIlwee Millwork, and sales had increased by 13 percent from the previous year (19 percent from the date that CMI came on board).

“It’s all very different around here now,” said Brian McIlwee. “Today, we try to make our employees feel vested in the company. There’s a feeling that something big is happening and *everybody* is excited about the changes and the future.”

“Part of that excitement,” McIlwee adds, “comes from all employees knowing what’s going on. It’s difficult for them not to. A project board has been posted in the staff lunchroom to outline the company’s various initiatives and the headway being made toward each.” Brian McIlwee takes personal responsibility for keeping this project board up-to-date.

Today, McIlwee Millwork is in business making windows ... with a very clear view to the future.



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