

CASE STUDY

Nine Weeks or the Business Fails: Compressing an Impossible Tooling Timeline to Save a Production Launch

How a same-night flight to China turned a 16-week lead time into a 9-week delivery — on schedule, against two hard deadlines

Company: PRe Plastics — Custom Injection Molder, Northern California | **Context:** New automotive program, first-time Tier 1 supplier | **Year:** 2019 – 2020

THE SITUATION

PRe Plastics had recently been awarded its first automotive production program — a strategically critical win following the loss of the company's largest customer. The program required three molds to be built in China, a toolshop qualified earlier in the year. Purchase orders had been issued early to compress the timeline as much as possible. The production launch date was fixed: March 2020.

The end customer's part designs were due in late summer. They arrived at the end of October — two months late. The customer would not move the launch date. The toolshop's standard lead time for molds of this complexity was 16 weeks. The time remaining was 9 weeks.

There was a second hard constraint layered on top of the first: Chinese New Year. The tools had to be built, trialed, corrected, and physically shipped out of China before the holiday shutdown. If they missed that window, the production launch would be missed. For a company whose survival depended on this program succeeding, that was not an acceptable outcome.

The news arrived at 3:00 in the afternoon. A flight to China was booked that night.

THE RESPONSE

Brian Miller flew to China alone that night. The following day, working directly with the toolshop's team on the floor, he built a day-by-day production schedule that mapped every remaining task across the 9-week window. Standard lead times assume normal sequencing and normal capacity allocation. This schedule assumed neither. Every week was committed. There was no float.

The schedule prioritized project-critical work in the time available before Chinese New Year — ensuring the tasks that could not be completed after the holiday were front-loaded and sequenced accordingly. Less critical cosmetic finishing work was identified and deliberately deferred: it would be completed by PRe after the tools arrived in California, allowing the core production timeline to hold.

The toolshop executed the schedule. Five days were spent in China during the trial phase in late December — running all-night mold trials, evaluating parts against specification, and developing a detailed action plan covering both required fixes and customer-requested modifications. Brian Miller, PRe's owner, and the customer's lead engineer were all present for the trials.

The molds were completed and shipped out of China before Chinese New Year. The end customer overnighted the tools to California to recover every possible day. PRe completed the remaining cosmetic work after receipt. First production parts were delivered to the customer on time.

THE RESULT

The production launch held. The automotive program — which would go on to double PRe’s revenue over the following two years — started on schedule. None of the downstream consequences of a missed launch were realized: no line disruption at the customer’s facility, no exposure at the Tier 1 level, no damage to a relationship PRe had spent the year building.

PERFORMANCE CATEGORY	RESULT
Tooling lead time required	9 weeks Against a 16-week standard
Hard deadlines managed simultaneously	Two Customer launch date and Chinese New Year shipping cutoff
Days on-site for mold trials	Five All-night trials, part evaluation, action planning
Production launch outcome	On time First parts delivered as required
Approach to deferred work	Deliberate and structured Cosmetic work completed by PRe post-shipment; critical work front-loaded

WHAT THIS DEMONSTRATES

Supply chain crises in manufacturing rarely arrive with warning. When they do, the difference between a missed launch and a held timeline is often a single decision made quickly and executed without hesitation. This situation required immediate physical presence, the ability to build a credible compressed schedule on the ground, and the judgment to distinguish work that had to be done in China from work that could safely be deferred.

It also required the discipline to hold the schedule once built — not as a plan on paper, but as a daily operational commitment across an international supplier relationship under maximum time pressure.

This is the kind of operational leadership Miller Fractional Leadership brings to injection molding companies — the experience to act decisively when the window is narrow and the stakes are high.

Brian Miller | Miller Fractional Leadership LLC | Fractional COO & Operational Improvement Partner

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