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LEAN THOUGHTS

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ASKING QUESTIONS ON THE SHOP FLOOR

Thanks to Don Breakley of the Manitoba Consortium for this article

It is always refreshing going to the **gemba** —actually walking a value stream all the way through an organization. This is where I learn to collect the questions to think about next. There is no doubt in my mind that all managers should walk their value streams as frequently as possible. By asking the right questions you can quickly discover almost all the things that need to be done. And because everything ends up on the shop floor it also reveals a lot about how management actually thinks.

After all the shop floor is a reflection of management!

In one company making good progress with lean, an operator was showing me his daily production instructions. We discussed the problems that were holding him up that day. I then asked how often he was able to complete his daily plan. Without hesitation he replied—never! So what do they do then? They just change tomorrow's plan! This was very revealing to the senior manager accompanying me, who was the proud architect of the central planning system that was "optimizing" production in each operation in each of their plants. This prompted a very interesting discussion when we met the management team later that day.

In another company I followed a top manager on a whirlwind tour to rally the troops. Accompanied by an army of staff he offered the shop floor team all the assistance they needed to accomplish their work, before he ran off to his next appointment. They looked baffled, because it was clear no one had told him they did not actually have enough work to do—the problem lay elsewhere. They were held up waiting for engineering drawings to arrive and for suppliers to deliver the right parts. Other departments were responsible for sorting out these problems.

In truth these events could have happened in most of our organizations, and not just in manufacturing. The reality is that as soon you begin asking the five whys across departments the trail goes cold. Because no one is responsible for the value stream as it flows through the organization. Once someone is appointed to be the value stream manager the first thing they need to do is to ask lots of questions.

One place to start asking questions is with planning or scheduling. Most planners were trained on simulations, which assume that if only the world would behave according to the plan things would work out, as they should do. To them improving the plan is all about collecting more data, improving data accuracy, getting better forecasts etc. When problems occur they find it difficult to acknowledge the extra volatility their frequent changes to the plan create—which usually make the situation worse and not better.

Toyota starts from a completely different assumption. ***They assume that even the best processes will continually be subject to frequent interruptions.*** So they pay a lot of attention to tracking progress in real time and to designing lean response processes to get back on track as quickly as possible—so plans are actually met every day! They also take responsibility for actively leveling and filtering out the noise in orders being passed to operations, in order to create as much stability for them as possible.

And they then go to work on the problems—using the common scientific approach to problem solving through root cause analysis and experimentation, which every manager and engineer learns from the day they join the company. So the second place to ask questions is in operations itself. What are the most frequent causes of interruption in the value stream and is there a problem solving capability ready to solve them? It is staggering how much attention Toyota continues to place on problem solving and on improving the basic stability (right first time on time capability and equipment (availability) in every activity).

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Where “Lean Thoughts” Become Reality



The third place to ask questions is in the other functions like purchasing, marketing and sales, human resources and engineering. For instance, I continue to be amazed how many firms are reluctant to take full responsibility for reconfiguring their supply base and synchronizing the operations of their suppliers with their own. Almost certainly they have too many suppliers, who are usually too far away to respond quickly enough. Compressing their end-to-end value streams could remove layers of cost while also minimizing its impact on the environment.

Likewise I am also surprised how many firms are reluctant to challenge their existing distribution channels. Some firms are learning that selling direct to end customers through the web generates additional sales, rather than cannibalizing existing channels. **They are also learning that listening to customers can show how to eliminate unnecessary costs while improving customer service.** Once you begin a win-win dialogue with customers who you know by name the opportunities for improvement are endless. Just watch what happens when Tesco surprises the world with it launches its new convenience-retailing format in California early next year.

So the question to think about is who is asking the right questions about how to improve each value stream in your organization?

AUTONOMOUS KAIZEN

Initially by Gary Kerr Leveraged LEAN

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Then modified by Richard Kunst

All you got to do is ask ? a famous sentence reiterated many times by Norm Bodek the author of “Quick and easy Kaizen”

Go ahead and ask your people if they can think of at least one idea that would make their job easier, of higher quality, faster, safer, more comfortable, or somehow better and they will probably just laugh and say “You only want one?” If all your people can think of things that would make your company more competitive then what’s stopping them?

- _ Culture and a feeling that we are not safe from potential failure if we try to improve
- _ There is no Leadership expectation that my job is to make improvements
- _ Ownership. This is not MY process, I only work here
- _ Training. I have not been trained in making improvements, we have engineers for that
- _ Systems. I have got some ideas but there is no-one to tell and no way implement them

We often talk of Continuous Improvement without really having any idea of what it takes to energize a mass of people towards a common goal and create a system where they can contribute.

We need to address the culture and promote a “Cause” culture rather than the natural “Blame” culture. Cause is about the system while Blame is about the person. While your culture focuses on the **who-to-punish**, rather than the **what-to-fix**, Continuous Improvement will just be a slogan and not a day to day reality. Effort must be rewarded as easily as success because it is the discretionary effort that we are trying to promote. 5S will help to grow the ownership if deployed correctly with Leadership support. The most difficult part has always been the System for Continuous Improvement. We don’t want people making unauthorised changes that might lead to problems but we do want ownership. These two elements appear to be in conflict.

At our La-Z-Boy Plant in Lincolnton NC we have been piloting our enhance Employee Suggestion Program (ESP) with good results. The program has a formal methodology but also the element of being able to implement Quick and Easy Kaizen opportunities. The Employee suggestion program is built on the premise that the everyone must always be in the mode of seeking continuous improvement. Hence we are always on the look for good ideas and eventually it will integrated into our cultural fabric as an expectation from every employee. It is no wonder Toyota averages 86 suggestions per employee per year on average without giving contributors a direct related reward .. it is just the thing to do to preserve and enhance jobs.

Continuous Improvement is not an event but an ongoing sustainable culture within the operation. This is probably why Toyota has never really embraced Kaizen Blitz’s or Rapid Improvement Workshops ... by naming them Kamakazi Kaizen. However in very select cases I have found them beneficial for training purposes. Do they work? Yes, but then look at all of the other losses because all of the organization energy was focused on a single event.

The employee suggestion program is steady and continuous and you can weave a suggestion objective into all of your employee’s annual objectives. You can contact Rene in our Lincolnton facility for the full details of the LZB Employee Suggestion Program. This system supports Continuous Improvement, provides an element of control and promotes ownership in a culture of ongoing change.

So unless you meeting or exceeding all of budget requirements and not scared of competition why not try something novel ... **by starting to ask all of your employees for just one suggestion.**

Consortium Event Schedule



Tour Workshop Conference

January	February	March	April	May	June
<p>T</p> <p>Wednesday 24 <u>Eaton Electrical</u>, contact Joe Fisher, JoeRFisher@eaton.com</p> <p>W</p> <p>La-Z-Boy Corporate Monroe MI February 14 & 15 <u>Enterprise Value Stream Mapping</u> How to use the VSM tools to map admin processes. Contact Richard Kunst for info. Richard.kunst@la-z-boy.com Register at www.ame.org</p>	<p>T</p> <p>Wednesday 14, <u>CFN Precision</u>, contact Paul Kaulback, pkaulback@cfn-inc.com</p>	<p>T</p> <p>Wednesday 21, <u>Nestle Waters</u>, contact Mariela Castano mcastano@perriergroup.com</p>	<p>T</p> <p>Wednesday 18, <u>CTS Corp.</u>, contact Bob Garces, Bob.Garces@ac.ctscorp.com</p> <p>C</p> <p>Lean Design & Development Conference Wed 18 to Fri 20 Chicago Contact www.iirusa.com/lean</p>	<p>T</p> <p>Wednesday 16, <u>Stackpole CSD</u>, contact Don Barber Don.Barber@stackpole.ca</p> <p>Consortium Shareshowcase</p> <p>Saturday 05 <u>CGL Guelph</u>, Contact Cindy Grolleman Grolleman@canada.com or Dave Deskur daved@cglmfg.com</p>	<p>T</p> <p>Wednesday 20, <u>Morrison LaMothe</u>, contact Tony Vita tvita@morrisonlamthe.com</p> <p>C</p> <p>AME Regional Conference Mon 18 to Thur 21 Edmonton, Alberta Contact www.measureupforsuccess.com</p>
July	August	September	October	November	December
		<p>T</p> <p>Wednesday 26, <u>Kraft Foods</u>, contact Hanif Jivraj hjivraj@Kraft.com</p>	<p>T</p> <p>Wednesday 10, <u>CGL Manufacturing</u> contact Dave Deskur daved@cglmfg.com</p> <p>C</p> <p>AME National Conference Mon 29 to Friday Nov 2 Chicago Contact www.ame.org</p>	<p>T</p> <p>Wednesday 14, <u>Messier-Dowty</u>, contact Mike Smith Mike.Smith@Messier-dowty.on.ca</p>	<p>T</p> <p>Wednesday 12, <u>Orenda</u>, contact Brenda McIntosh brendamcintosh@orenda.com</p>