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LEAN THOUGHTS

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What to do in case of stalling

Lean Facilitator Mike Thelen shares his experiences with transforming traditional companies to lean enterprise.

The most difficult obstacle to a successful lean implementation in a traditional environment is culture change. While a company can hire consultants, develop work teams, and even begin lean initiatives, if the company only "talks the talk," the initiative soon becomes just that, talk, and the implementation stalls.

The stall may happen when some detail of the implementation is overlooked or misunderstood. When asked, the operators/hourly associates are willing to move forward, but often only with the consent (or direction) of supervisors. Supervisors are willing to move forward, but only with the consent of managers. Managers are willing to move forward, but only with the consent of staff or organizational leaders. As for the organizational leaders themselves, they must always be willing to move forward, or else the implementation will surely stall.

The stall may occur days, weeks, months or even years after implementation, but it will occur. What can be done *when* implementation stalls? The challenge is making sure that the stall is temporary.

Every person in the organization has a responsibility to make sure implementation continues to move forward. The goal during an implementation is to coach each person to utilize the tools (problem/countermeasure logs, kaizen implementation requests, observation techniques, etc.) to help build the lean culture of continuous improvement with respect for people. Yet, even if people are coached in such a way, the likelihood of a stalled implementation is high (the unverified claim is 95% of all implementation efforts fail).

Gemba is critical

There's more to gemba than simply a walk here or there. It involves the belief that *all* problems should be reviewed at the place where the actual work is done. The entire executive management group must be involved at that physical place. As soon as management commitment begins to waiver, so will hourly support and participation. Executive management must be visible at the *gemba*, during regularly scheduled walks and random observations.

The gemba is the place (and time, if referencing the "gemba walk") to ask questions. If leaders simply go and see without asking, nothing is learned. One of the most difficult aspects of the gemba walk is learning what questions to ask to draw information out. This specific process of questioning to generate discussion is what builds continuous improvement.

As an example, during a recent "gemba walk," a group noticed inventory turns were significantly down at the planning visual board. (The planners for the value stream had been utilizing a visual board for approximately 12 months, and the board had shown improvement numerous times already.) This was odd, since orders were strong and inventory had only slightly increased (statistically). The cause, which was exposed by the right people being at the right place and asking the right questions, was that there were a significant number of orders not written because of material/component delays from vendors. Since the vendors had not committed to delivery dates, customers were not given delivery dates. Without delivery dates, no production orders could be entered into the system. Even though there were orders on the sales side of the value stream, there were no goods sold to offset the increase in inventory of the available materials. This scenario had not presented itself before as there were many larger, more obvious problems to resolve first. The group had effectively "lowered the water to expose the rocks," thus uncovering a new problem and cause.

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Where “Lean Thoughts” Become Reality



Participative problem solving is a requirement

Does an environment of continuous learning through active problem identification and resolution exist in the organization? Does the recent satellite television ad showing the cable company management participating in “blame-storming” seem more like reality and less like fantasy?

All employees, at any level of an organization, must feel that it is acceptable to challenge and disagree with superiors. Employees must feel empowered enough to request an open meeting with the next level of management if they feel strongly about their position. One person cannot be allowed to “strong-arm” an entire organization into following a specific path. If allowed, this effectively shuts down idea generation. Participative problem solving is not an option. It must be a requirement.

Lean leadership must have *confidence*

To be truly effective, a lean leader must have the confidence to challenge decisions made in an organization that countermand lean. That person must also have executive management’s *vote of confidence* and assurance of continued employment, regardless of challenges he or she raises.

Too often, the lean leader feels compelled to follow direction provided by a superior. The difficulty with lean is that it is NOT traditional manufacturing. Traditional manufacturing is exactly what executive management has grown up on. Even the best, most supportive executives will default to decisions based on experience when difficulties arise. Thus, it should be expected that those decisions would be based on traditional manufacturing theory. If the lean leader does not have the confidence to confront this decision, no conflict with lean theory will be noted. If no conflict is noted, no problem is identified. Without problem identification (and the resulting gemba evaluation), no participative countermeasure development can take place. Thus, no learning can be achieved and shared.

Lean leadership must have *competence*

A lean leader also may be under-qualified for the position. That is, the person may have the necessary leadership traits and capabilities, but he or she may still be *under-qualified* due to lack of experience. Just as implementing lean will take years for an organization, developing lean leaders may also take years. In the end, a lean leader must truly understand the tools, concepts and theory of lean.

All too often the facility’s lean leader is chosen, sent away for a 40-hour training session, and brought back to be the “lean expert” of the facility. If an organization in the Western Hemisphere is progressive, there may even be a requirement for the lean leader to participate with other potential lean leaders in a learning environment. This learning may take place for several weeks to several months. When the requirement is met, the individual is now considered fully trained and ready to lead an organization out of the depths of traditional manufacturing and into the light of a lean system.

Does six weeks or six months of training make someone an “expert”? One of my mentors often said he does not believe himself to be an expert, but a student. He is *always* learning. Even after more than 20 years in the Toyota system and the mentoring business, he is *still* learning. It takes time to progress from understanding the tools, through concepts and into theory. Without that time, lean leaders are often lacking the competence to *correctly* challenge executive leadership pertaining to “un-lean” decisions.

How should the organization drive this train?

In true lean systems, there exists a simple belief that one needs value-added experiences to never stop learning. This learning process occurs slowly over time.

The same is true when it comes to grooming lean leaders. Promote slowly. Experience of a few months is not enough. Begin by selecting those people who show the required aptitude (confidence) and desire to be lean leaders. They may be today’s front-line supervisors, accountants, direct-labor operators, support staff or middle managers. Involve them in lean training (internal, external, through consultancy - whatever the organization must do to build a knowledge base). Let them learn and grow. Once they have sufficient confidence and competence, move them into formal lean leadership roles. Most importantly, make sure they are grooming other individuals for future lean leadership roles throughout the value stream as they progress. This design, carried over to other personnel value streams, is how an organization can guarantee succession planning without the stress of “sudden awareness”.

There is no magic pill for lean initiatives. The lean process requires time, commitment, and determination. Companies that use lean tools for short-term gain will achieve some limited success. However, without the culture supporting those tools, the lean initiative will fail, becoming the “flavour of the week” that everyone knew would not last.

“Each person fulfilling his or her duties to the utmost can generate great power when gathered together, and a chain of such power can generate a ring of power.” - Kiichiro Toyoda, Toyota Motor Company founder

Mike Thelen is lean facilitator at Aberdeen, S.D.-based Hub City Inc., a subsidiary of the Regal-Beloit Corporation, Beloit, Wis. He has led lean initiatives in positions from front-line supervisor to system coordinator at various corporations since 2001.

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2008 Consortium Event Schedule



Tour Workshop Conference

January	February	March	April	May	June
<p>T</p> <p>Wednesday 16 Eaton Electrical, contact Joe Fisher, JoeRFisher@eaton.com</p>	<p>T</p> <p>Wednesday 13, ACE Bakery, contact Cindy Grolleman, cgrolleman@acebakery.com</p>	<p>T</p> <p>Wednesday 19, Nestle Waters, contact Mariela Castano mcastano@perriergroup.com</p>	<p>C</p> <p>Consortium Shareshowcase</p> <p>Saturday 05 Eaton Milton, Contact Cindy Grolleman cgrolleman@acebakery.com or Joe Fisher JoeRFisher@eaton.com</p>	<p>T</p> <p>Wednesday 14, Alumicor, contact Barry Wood barry@Alumicor.com</p>	<p>T</p> <p>Wednesday 18, Morrison LaMothe, contact Tony Vita tvita@morrisonlamthe.com</p>
July	August	September	October	November	December
		<p>T</p> <p>Wednesday 24, Kraft Foods, contact Hanif Jivraj hjivraj@Kraft.com</p> <p>C</p> <p>Executive Forum Tuesday & Wednesday 23rd & 24th Contact Richard to register rkunst@kumstartofsolutions.com</p> <p>C</p> <p>22nd Transportation Thursday 24th http://www.transportconference.net/register.html</p>	<p>T</p> <p>Wednesday 16, CTS Corp., contact Navneet Mann, navneet.mann@ctscorp.com</p>	<p>T</p> <p>Wednesday 12, Messier-Dowty, contact Mike Smith Mike.Smith@Messier-dowty.on.ca</p>	<p>T</p> <p>Wednesday 10, Orenda, contact Brenda McIntosh brendamcintosh@orenda.com</p>