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Lean Thoughts

Bored by Lean

Despite the best intentions, people tire of everyday tasks, whether it's exercise, housecleaning, or mowing the lawn. Similarly, apathy creeps into all lean initiatives. Unless such apathy is strategically countered, it will metastasize throughout the organization.

Apathy is a state of indifference, which is diametrically opposed to the lean principle of continued process improvement. Apathy is a common reaction to stress, where it manifests as "learned helplessness" and is commonly associated with depression. For a lean initiative team, it reflects a lack of interest in things that team members don't consider important. Nothing improves when people stop caring.

Whether using a lean Six Sigma quantification methodology or other lean- principled effort, it's always exciting when a program launches. The buy-in from members of the lean team is at its peak. Although arduous, *kaizen* events, developing measurable results, and defining metrics of improvement create a dynamic for change, improvement, participation, and purpose. According to Evan Miller, president of Goshen, Indiana-based Hertzler Systems Inc., "The key to success in the lean environment is discipline. Initially, many companies just don't know how to manage projects. It's important to learn to set formal expectations, make promises, and set boundaries around how much you're going to try to accomplish."

Eliminating lean apathy

Six months into a new lean initiative, people get tired. They're reacting the same way they do to their New Year's resolution to get to the gym every morning at 5 a.m.: By June it's become 6 a.m. twice a week. When this happens, it's time for some coaching--a fresh pair of eyes.

"One important discipline is a formal change-control process," Miller notes. "We need flexibility in our rapid-pace business world. Change control provides a process for prioritizing and managing the impact of those changes. It is one of the most important tools that control 'scope creep.'"

Indeed. When a project's metrics drag along with little result, apathy sets in and team members feel discouraged. Change control is an important tool to re-empower the team.

Provide results

In a data-driven culture, there are cost-effective ways to simultaneously collect and visualize critical data that allow members of a lean team to commit and recommit to continued process improvement. In a Six Sigma environment, the ability to anticipate these quantifiable measurements allows the project to continue in a consistent manner, as follows:

- Reduce costs and cycle times of Six Sigma projects by automatically collecting critical outcome data (critical Y) and the inputs that drive those outcomes (critical X).
- Focus attention on improvement goals through innovative defect -improvement charts in service and manufacturing businesses.
- Uncover hidden sources of variation using automated statistical tools.
- Drill down into data to identify significant opportunities for improvement.
- Build an enterprise database with reliable data for Lean initiatives.
- Connect with other information systems to streamline and reduce operational costs.

Where Lean Thoughts can become Reality

"Unless you try to do something beyond what you have already mastered, you will never grow."

Ronald. E. Osborn

KUNST Solutions Corp.

Richard Kunst
President and CEO
Tel: 519 651 2341 E-mail: rkunst@kunstartofsolutions.com Web: www.kunstartofsolutions.com

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Prevention is key
Because apathy can be anticipated in a lean effort, documented processes can be developed to ensure that all team members retain their passion--the antithesis of apathy.

• **Rotate the team members**. It's unreasonable to ask the same team members to maintain the same level of enthusiasm for improvement over time. Limit the time any single member serves on a particular lean team; make it clear that the move isn't a punishment, and that their fresh eyes are needed somewhere else in the organization.

• **Hire lean consultants**. When the initial return on investment (ROI) of a lean initiative starts to fade, have a lean or Six Sigma consulting organization perform a scheduled gap analysis. Undoubtedly, they will find areas of improvement that internal members cannot detect.

Product control
A company's earliest quality efforts usually focus on protecting the customer from receiving bad product. This is often achieved with a final inspection process that separates bad product from good. If it's easy to collect and store this failure data from product inspections, companies can track the number of good and bad units and the reasons that product failed inspection. Over a short time, lean organizations find that when product inspections are done at earlier steps in the process, more costly defects are reduced at the end of the process. Like an exercise program that's working, keeping the team engaged is much easier when these types of quantifiable results can be reported early and often; it's part of the antidote to apathy.

Process control
As quality efforts pay off in reduced defect costs and consistently low defect levels, often the next move is to implement variable statistical process control. Not only are your inspection costs reduced by decreasing the size and frequency of samples inspected, but these new data will also help you evaluate the stability of the manufacturing process. Companies can immediately recognize small process changes before they become big enough to produce bad product. Real-time statistical alarms help prevent bad product from reaching the customers because the process, not the product, is controlled; this contributes to buy-in and ongoing reengagement to continued process improvement.

"There are ways to reduce the costs and cycle times of Lean, which mitigate some of the resistance and apathy;

• Capture the right data to drive business transformation.
• Connect with other information systems to streamline and reduce data acquisition costs.
• Sustain the gains made during the control phase with real-time data collection-and-control failure notification.
• Multiply ROI from existing business systems by making better use of data.
• Focus attention on improvement goals through innovative defect-improvement charts.
• Uncover hidden sources of variation with automated analysis.

Some Do's and Don'ts
• At first, Lean will seem like added work. It is, but it pays off. Resist the urge to pull people out of training.
• When you fix things, fix them for the last time.
• Challenge the boss with irrefutable data.
• Don't leap to help customers eliminate waste until you've given Six Sigma at your company time to mature.
• Don't wait to implement Six Sigma. Embrace it completely and holistically.

The literal translation of apathy is "without emotion." In the lean process, this translates as, "Who cares?" This attitude will spell the demise of a lean program and must be stopped by planning and anticipating its appearance.

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President and CEO
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