

How to Implement Lean Manufacturing

As a trainer tasked with implementing lean manufacturing in UK based manufacturing businesses I am often asked by senior managers "Where should we start? or "Which lean tool should we introduce first"? Without hesitation I always reply, "You must start by getting your people on board". I have seen more lean implementation programmes fail because of poor management and lack of people skills than for any other reason. The Introduction of Lean Manufacturing into a business which has not used these tools before can take some getting used to, particularly for managers who have always gone about their roles in a certain way. Some Managers feel threatened, intimidated and even embarrassed by their lack of knowledge about lean manufacturing which can cause them to hinder rather than promote change. In my experience the implementation of lean manufacturing never fails because of the efforts of shop floor operators but because of the lack of leadership of management. So how do we set about implementing lean manufacturing?

First of all the Senior Management team of a company need to be totally committed. They must want to implement lean manufacturing and be prepared to wholeheartedly support any projects it spawns.

Once this has been agreed, the Senior Management team need to communicate their vision of the Future state (where they want the business to be after improvements have been made) to the rest of the management team. This should then be followed by a management brainstorming session to help appoint a natural leader of the project and to generate a set of lean objectives.

The Project Leader must be capable of operating at a cross functional level and be able to demonstrate the interpersonal skills required of a good change manager. You should be looking for a good communicator, someone who is both persuasive and charismatic and someone who has only the best interests of the company at heart - no empire builders or ego trippers need apply!

Mistakes are often made at this point. Some companies assume it is only a production or manufacturing project and therefore do not involve any other departments, others appoint a wholly inappropriate project leader who has the company/process knowledge but not the people skills to bind others into a cross functional team.

Assuming you are able to find a suitable Project Leader, you then need to get a team of people together from across the value stream. The best way to do this is to brief the workforce, detailing what is involved, why you are introducing lean manufacturing and how it will affect them and then request volunteers from your company's departments. The exact number of people does not really matter although in my experience around 5-7 people, each from a different department works best, although this does depend on the size of your company. You now have your Lean Implementation team.

The team must be coached by a main board director or senior executive, someone able to provide support to the team members as and when required. Where to Start?

Once the team has been assembled you need to train the implementation team in lean manufacturing techniques. It would be useful to employ the services of a professional lean expert, someone who has experienced the trials and tribulations of implementing lean for real, not a theoretician. I would suggest starting with something simple like 5S.

5S, 5C or CANDO as it is sometimes known is concerned with the creation of world class work place organisation. 5S is a lean tool that can be implemented very quickly; it is a company wide programme, forms the basis of visual management and involves very little expenditure.

Train the lean implementation team in 5S. Select an area where 5S can be introduced as a pilot project. Choose your pilot area carefully, make sure it has a manager or supervisor who is enthusiastic, open to new ideas and willing to take a leading part in the introduction. Remember your pilot project can not be allowed to fail. It is vitally important you get some quick easy 'wins' so identify some 5S projects which can be accomplished fairly quickly which make a striking visual impact. Set bite sized objectives for the area which can be achieved in less than one month. This first month is a critical stage because it will set the tone for the rest of the lean programme implementation.

Your charismatic, results driven Lean implementation project leader should come into his/her own during this period. Initially there will be some scepticism and negativity from some members of the team. This is only natural and is to be expected because you are implementing what can be quite radical change. Your project leader will need to be a confidante, communicator and arbitrator during this period. In my experience the best way to get the 'buy in' of the guys is to involve them in small bite sized projects where success is almost assured and changes can be noticed almost instantly. This forms the basis of Kaizen or continuous improvement, where permanent change is effected through small incremental improvements rather than any one major step change.

Once the pilot project has been running successfully for a period, say 3 months, roll the 5S programme out to the other company areas. Choose the areas where the implementation team comes from. By doing this we get a 'ripple' effect throughout the business analogous to throwing a stone into a stream. You should now be on your way to 5S success.

The result of this approach should be that you have created the conditions for a successful lean implementation, helped your staff get used to the idea of change whilst making some striking improvements along the way.

In summary, an example of a lean implementation programme would be:-

- Senior Management to agree and communicate their lean vision
- Management brainstorm to identify project leader and set objectives
- Communicate plan and vision to the workforce
- Ask for volunteers to form the Lean Implementation team (5-7 works best, all from different departments)
- Appoint members of the Lean Manufacturing Implementation Team
- Train the Implementation Team in the various lean tools - make a point of trying to visit other non competing businesses which have implemented lean
- Select a Pilot Project – I suggest you start with 5S
- Run the pilot for 2-3 months - learn from your mistakes
- Roll out pilot to other factory areas
- Evaluate results, encourage feedback
- Once you are satisfied that you have a habitual programme consider introducing the next lean tool. Select the one which will give you the biggest return for your business.

The next project might be the introduction of Kanban or the introduction of Cellular Manufacturing or the adoption of improvement tools such as SMED or TPM.

Whatever you decide, remember, make sure your people are on board because you will get where you want to be a lot sooner with their support and co-operation.

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