

# Leading a Lean Project

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Some parts of lean manufacturing can be described as 'organised' common sense. However if lean is so simple why do so many companies fail to derive the full benefits from their lean programmes?

In our experience there are a number of common mistakes:-

- Assuming Lean is only a manufacturing project
- Failing to fully engage with staff
- Starting too large &ndash; The Big Bang
- Poor team work

### Assuming lean is only a manufacturing project

A lean philosophy looks to add value from a customer's perspective by the removal of non value adding waste such as defects, waiting time etc thus allowing 'value to flow'. It is analogous to opening up all the locks in a canal system thus allowing the water to flow from the highest point to the lowest point.

If we can remove the 'locks' or bottlenecks and disconnects in our business processes we can dramatically shorten lead times and improve delivery performance at minimal cost.

So why do some manufacturing companies focus on implementing lean in the production areas but totally ignore the other disciplines in the business? Any department which is part of the value stream i.e. is involved in some way with the product; need to take part in the lean programme. After all if only one of these elements is not carried out satisfactorily, it is your customer which will suffer.

For instance:-

- If our designers design something we cannot manufacture
  - If buyers do not ensure parts are available on time and manage a lean supply chain
  - If Finance do not pay our suppliers on time
  - If Sales & Marketing do not check and load orders in line with our business system requirements
  - If Logistics do not ensure transport is available to deliver the product when our customer requires it
- We will ultimately let the customer down.

So you can see, lean requires all functions to play their part.

Whilst you may choose not to involve all departments at the outset of a lean programme, there needs to be a 'joined-up' plan when looking at value stream improvements across the business at some point in the lean project.

### Failing to fully engage with staff

The lean project leaders have done their homework and created a phased plan so surely nothing can fail. However have you considered the 'people skills' of the leaders?

Have you considered that people within your organisation are going to be asked in some cases to change the way they have always done things for this new-fangled philosophy called 'lean'.

The route to a successful project is by being able to fully engage with the team and the wider staff members. The ability to get people on board the programme and 'win the hearts and minds' is paramount to a successful initiative. Under estimate this at your peril.

Henry Ford, the famous automotive industrialist once said, People will invariably do what is asked of them, the skill for managers is to ask them to do the right thing.

So do people actually resist change? I think not. However people do resist the way change is introduced. When changing something and introducing a philosophy such as lean it is paramount your staff fully understands the following as part of a pre implementation education programme:-

- What is Lean all about?

- How does Lean affect them?
- How does it differ from what they do today?
- What will be expected of them?
- What are the benefits they can expect to enjoy?
- What are the downsides? for instance a typical concern is that lean implies fewer employees and possible redundancies. You need to address this issue in the initial education programme.

Lean will only prosper in an environment where people do not fear the implementation of lean will result in the loss of their jobs, where staff have the ability to communicate their ideas to the senior management and the lean project leaders can effectively communicate with the implementation team and the workforce.

Starting too large &ndash; &lsquo;The Big Bang&rsquo;

The lack of time is often cited as the reason some companies implement lean at breath neck speeds. They carry out some lean training for their senior managers and launch it with a big bang. The result &ndash; chaos, friction between departments and even sometimes conflict between departmental objectives.

Lean is not a race. Lean is a programme which requires a &lsquo;joined up&rsquo; thought process by the cross function implementation team. It requires you to run &lsquo;pilot projects&rsquo; to test the water and learn from your mistakes before you roll the programme out company wide. It needs different departments &lsquo;singing off the same hymn sheet&rsquo; to ensure common objectives and timescales. Most of all it needs carefully planning, doing, checking and reviewing to ensure that maximum benefit is being derived.

#### Poor Team Work

It is important that the lean implementation team can work together and represent a balanced set of opinions across your organisation. As a result the make up of the team needs to be both cross functional, populated with people who are aware of the &lsquo;bigger picture&rsquo; and who can put aside any prejudices, ill feeling or dislike of any other team member. After all, there is no &lsquo;I&rsquo; in team.

I have seen a number of lean project teams implode because of in-fighting where several team members were using the lean programme as a personal ego trip or a means to push themselves forward in an organisation for accelerated promotion or remuneration purposes.

The irony is that if a team blends together and produces some spectacular lean improvements then personal recognition often comes along anyway because the team members will be in much demand to improve other parts of the organisation.

Focus on getting a team together of goal orientated, positive individuals who understand their roles with the team and the overall objectives of the team. Select a leader who has all of these attributes but also has &lsquo;pie piper&rsquo; charisma and exudes passion for the lean cause.