

Lean Enterprise Academy



LEA e-letter – 19 February 2008

Jumping to Solutions

Dear Lean Community Member

We are all guilty of one of the greatest sins with lean – not having the patience to really understand the problem we are trying to solve and then jumping to a solution that may or may not be the right way to solve this problem. This results in lots of Muda – wasted effort that does not really make a difference – to your organization or to your consumers.

We see this all the time. Analysing the enquiries we get tells us this problem is not getting any better. When people ask for our help with their lean efforts we ask them what problem they are trying to solve using lean. Often the answer is “we have been told to do lean and we need some training”. When we ask what this training is going to accomplish and how, they say you tell us - you are the lean experts!

If we then suggest they go back and clarify why their management wants to do lean and what they want to accomplish with lean so we can then look at alternative ways of learning lean rather than sitting in a classroom, things get more interesting. The answers we get tell us a lot about the organisation – after all the shop floor really is a reflection of management.

If the answer is “but I have a training budget to use up by the year end” or “we have been told to do so many rapid improvement events” we know they are not yet really serious about lean. If it prompts a dialogue with their management, this usually suggests a quite different course of action, such as working with senior management to design their lean transformation back from the needs of the business. As is often the case the real problem is very different to what they thought and so are the possible solutions.

Being cynical about this misses the point. This behaviour reflects the management systems we currently work in. Unless we recognise we need to change this the problem will reoccur time and time again – maybe in more sophisticated guises that are not so easy to spot.

In some situations we have to make judgements quickly. Doctors are doing this all the time. Indeed it only takes doctors an average of 19 seconds to come up with a diagnosis – with an 85% success rate! This is pretty impressive and of course their initial hypothesis may or may not be modified by subsequent tests. The real, sometimes fatal danger here is being unwilling to challenge the initial incorrect diagnosis in those 15% of cases, even in the face of subsequent evidence to the contrary.

Managers trying to improve a process requiring collaboration between people from different areas face a trickier situation – how to know what is

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really going on and what the causes are of things going wrong. In my experience the initial success rate in these circumstances is nearer 15%. Collecting data and running simulations may be useful, but as Taiichi Ohno said “facts are better than data”. The real situation can only be grasped by going to the Gemba – to the place where the value creating work is actually done – and asking the right questions. If problems are hidden and management is all about “making (read gaming) the numbers” it is not so easy and you are unlikely to get straight answers.

Indeed the truth is that it takes two parties to diagnose a problem and to evaluate alternative solutions. Senior management understands the context of the problem while the shop floor understands the details of how work is actually done. This is true at every level in the organisation. Hence the need for a common language for the dialogue that brings together the context and the details, that helps to frame the problem correctly and then to plan and monitor the experiments to test alternative solutions. This is what Toyota’s A3 thinking process is all about.

Knowing how to ask the right questions to provoke the right kind of thinking about the right things is a challenge for managers used to people looking upwards to them for the answers. Giving answers is not only dangerous but it takes away the opportunity for employees to learn how to think. Getting everyone in the organisation to think in the right way about the right things and to continually challenge the way things are done is one of the most powerful results of lean thinking.

Yours sincerely

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