

Standardized Worrying – April 2004

Years ago when Dan Jones and I first visited Toyota in Japan, we were struck by something that seemed out of keeping with their continuing success. They seemed to worry all the time. We met managers who had just accomplished remarkable feats of muda removal during kaizen events and yet they couldn't seem to just relax and enjoy it. Instead they were busy analyzing what they had just done and trying to think of ways it could be even better. Dan and I began to say to ourselves, "Even smiling is muda at Toyota."

By contrast, kaizen events in other firms we have visited over the years have often been marked by celebrations and self-congratulation, no matter how much was really accomplished or how modest the improvement goal.

Recently, while reading's Jeff Liker's excellent new book "The Toyota Way", I came across the section on "hansei" or reflection, which for Toyota is the third step in their PDCA process for every improvement. It helped me put in words what I've been feeling for years about the difference between kaizen at Toyota and at most other firms.

Toyota's idea is simply that every time we analyze a situation (the "P" for "plan" in PDCA) and then try a new way (the "D" for "do"), it's time to reflect very carefully (hansei) on what we have just done. (This, of course, is the "C" for "check".) In most companies the fact that the new performance of a system met expectations is the end of the discussion. And if it didn't meet expectations, this is only to be expected with some experiments. (Remember that controlled experimentation using the scientific method is what kaizen really is.)

But for Toyota it seems to be very different. In their view, if the performance met expectations, surely they could have done even better. The performance objective was too modest. And if the performance did not meet expectations, something was wrong with the original plan and it is important to understand what and why. Indeed, this is yet another use for the "five whys", but this time applied to the improvement process itself.

But note that in either case there is no room for celebrating what has been achieved even if the results are substantial or for celebrating the conduct of a noble experiment even if it failed. The objective must be to either find out why it didn't work or why it didn't work even better. In short, with hansei Toyota has a formula for standardized worrying!

Surely this seems harsh. Can't these guys just have some fun? But the sobering reality of life, at least for me, is that folks who worry every day about every thing are very likely to have little to worry about in the long run. By contrast, those who grade their kaizen performance on how hard they tried -- whatever the results -- are likely to be very happy in the short term but soon may be looking for work.

So please give some thought to how you approach kaizen. If no improvement in performance is ever good enough and if every kaizen failure undergoes meticulous analysis to understand exactly why it didn't work, you too will become a standardized worrier. And, very likely, you will become a leader in a continuously successful enterprise.

Best regards,

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