



Words of wisdom

Three pieces of Lean advice

BY DR. TIMOTHY HILL

I recently had some feedback from a reader who offered me three pieces of advice to pass along to those of you who have senior leaders who are as much a help as they are a hindrance for your Lean work.

1. Help the president understand what Lean is.
2. Have a good foundation.
3. A company has Lean “measures,” but they’re just wallpaper.

I’ll go through each of them and add my two cents worth.

■ **Help the president understand what Lean is.** If the president or members of the senior leadership team don’t know what Lean is, then I would advise you to keep your description of Lean simple. Take them to the gemba, show them waste, spell out how much that waste is costing you and tell them that successful Lean initiatives can make that waste go away. Tell them about what their expected roles and responsibilities will be. Again, keep it simple. Let them know that they’ll be expected to support the Lean initiatives by showing up at some training sessions, participating in some gemba exercises and so on. Be sure to tell them that Lean will not take up too much of their time. In fact, if participating in Lean takes up more than five to 10 percent of anyone’s time, you’ve got to look at what you’re doing!

If those senior leaders have an idea of what Lean is, but make statements such as, “That won’t work here,” “We have too many products” or “I wonder if people just want to be told what to do,” then

you’ve got some problem-solving to do. I’ll work out a solution for each response and then let you determine which is true for you.

- “That won’t work here” – This is a famous “we can’t get there from here” response. Chances are, you’ve painted your Lean initiative too broadly. Back it up and present your initiatives as pilots or tests that you’ll be doing a PDSA (Plan, Do, Study, Act) cycle on.
- “We have too many products” – Again, you’ve probably portrayed your initial Lean efforts too broadly. You might want to expand your Lean efforts as time goes on, but start in one area. Pick a high-yield, troublesome area that stands a reasonably high chance of success to start your Lean initiatives in.
- “I wonder if people just want to be told what to do” – This (or something like this) is probably the worst thing you can hear. It speaks to a near-total lack of standard work, accountability and the acceptance of Lean.

■ **Have a good foundation.** Some companies will be approaching Lean like it’s a flavour of the month. Remember world class and excellence fever? What causes flavour of the month is a management group that takes too many initiatives on at one time or a failure to really think through an initiative and connect it to what you do. If your senior leadership is starting to think that Lean is the way to go, you can help to set the stage for it. Let them know who will be doing what, outlining their roles and responsibilities, and include an easy-to-reach target amongst

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your early Lean deployments.

If your senior management has done their homework, then they’ll be much more likely to succeed at sustaining their Lean initiatives. Remember to start simple — a 5S project here, a simple PDCA there, plus one larger target. They will be able to see success, share those successes and be more likely to grow out that success when they do their hansei and yokotan discussions. A hansei discussion happens in the teams themselves. They discuss what they’ve accomplished, what they need to remember and what they need to move forward. A yokotan discussion is when they talk about their Lean successes outside of the group, publish the news in the employee newsletter and so on.

■ **A company has Lean measures, but they are just wallpaper.** What can happen when there is no real root cause analysis being performed is that they post their measures but there’s no discussion as to why the measures aren’t being met. There might be some general discussion in weekly and monthly management meetings (which can go on for hours),

but no closure. I once had a client that I was doing Lean leadership with and they had a life-threatening problem for 21 years! It was raised at every quality meeting and then put on the back burner. They never did a root cause problem analysis because they had a band-aid solution in place! If that band-aid broke, they were at risk of losing their supplier quality designation.

Pick a long-term problem. Do a root cause analysis on it. Chip away at the problem. You might not solve it completely, but don’t confuse better with best! 🍁

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Question from the floor...

QUESTION: I recently switched jobs. I’m with a great employer, but the employees seem to be really concrete and aren’t embracing Lean. In fact, they reject every example I give them. They say they want examples that are like them. What do I do?

ANSWER: I sympathize with you. There are people who are just very concrete and literal in their thinking. Some have suggested that it’s their way to avoid change. Others say it’s just the way they are.

My suggestion for you is this: Provide examples that are as close to their line of business as possible. Do yourself a favour and take the time to walk the floors with these people. Go gemba! Listen to what they have to say about their challenges. Take this information and use it to create your examples. This will help you out tremendously.

When you’re in the Lean training session, encourage people to come forward with their ideas about how your content will impact their work. Get them to describe the pros and cons of implementation.

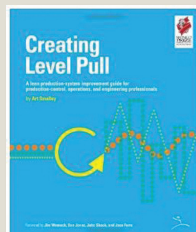
Think about how you rely on participant feedback and input when you’re doing a value stream map. The participants will see their challenges; you don’t need to point them out. Trust your participants to come up with examples using those very same insights.

From the bookshelf... *Creating Level Pull* by Art Smalley

One issue I have with kaizen implementation is that most companies focus on “point kaizen” (e.g., reducing setup times, implementing 5S, etc.) that improves a small portion of the value stream, or they focus on “flow kaizen” that improves the entire value stream for one product family.

What they don’t do is implement “system kaizen.” *Creating Level Pull* addresses this. The book introduces a Lean production control system that ties together the flows of information and materials supporting every product family in a facility.

Creating Level Pull shows you how to advance a Lean manufacturing transformation from a focus on isolated improvements to improving the entire plant-wide production system. It does this by showing you how to implement a Lean production control system.



“The workbook is unique because it is a step-by-step case study on how to implement a level, pull-based production control system,” said author Art Smalley. “This is a new step towards system kaizen that is not yet well understood outside of Toyota.”

“A truly Lean production-control system that rigorously controls production at every step and levels demand from the customer has proved a great challenge for most firms,” said Jim Womack, founder and senior advisor to the Lean Enterprise Institute. “But Art gives you all the knowledge needed to succeed.”

The book is also unique in its use of plain English. It will walk you through the implementation process, value stream maps and such topics as load levelling (heijunka) in order to deal with variations in demand.