



# Lean and your leaders

## How to get them out of the office and to the gemba

BY DR. TIMOTHY HILL

A reader wrote to me and described a situation with his employer. He described his firm's adherence to Lean as something that was good on a good day and rather bad on a bad day. In fact, I've heard similar descriptions from readers in the past. So I thought that this topic would make a great article, but where do I start?

Should I start with how these employers didn't get that Lean was a journey and not a one-time project? Or perhaps I should start with how they didn't move past a 5S assignment. Then I recalled how the reader said that he could not get the site leadership down to the gemba. Bingo. I knew that I had my article.

Most of the time, a Lean initiative goes well. People are rallied around a value stream mapping exercise or they're asked to point out things about their jobs that they don't like. Add a little theory of Lean, a little history and a little go-and-see, and you've pretty much got most Lean training. I've said this before and I'll say it again: Lean's success is only about 20 percent tools and training. The remaining 80 percent is attributable to the support that it receives from senior management.

And that means getting senior managers out of their seats, out of the boardroom and out of the meeting rooms, and to the gemba.

You've got to get them to where the action

is. The very best way to do this is to plan ahead. Book their time well ahead of time. Know when you'll be going to the gemba. In manufacturing, I've often involved senior leaders in the first session of the training, and then when we go to the gemba. That way, they'll be in place to acknowledge the start of the Lean commitment and to see things for themselves as one of the team. If you can get them out to the gemba early, you can get them out later on, too.

It's important to get senior leaders out to the gemba in a non-threatening way, and to get them out often. Getting senior leaders out is one thing; doing so in a non-threatening way is another. There can be an impression that senior leaders are "out to get you" if they venture past their office. The more often you can get them out, the greater the chance of beating this stereotype down. I've often gone around the plant with them, guiding their behaviour so that they act like Toyota managers.

Toyota managers ask open-ended questions and will form their decisions based on facts gathered from the workplace. They will not jump to conclusions based on a single observation. They will not punish people for bringing forward a problem (which is really an opportunity); nor will they act on a superficial root cause. They will encourage asking why five times until they get down to an actionable countermeasure.

The greater success you have in engaging leaders in Lean walkabouts, the greater success you will have on your Lean journey. Take pictures. Take lots of pictures, including before and after shots from your 5S work and early Lean successes. Share these with the senior leaders so that they understand the importance of your Lean work and want to see it for themselves.

Still facing resistance? Try taking them to your Lean boards. You'll want to install your Lean boards where everyone can see them. Build the Lean boards up in your communications to employees. Place news about Lean accomplishments in the employee newsletter. Better yet, start a Lean section in your newsletter or regular correspondence. Encourage everyone to take an active part and eventually the senior leaders will take notice.

In addition, try making senior managers a part of the recognition ritual. The *In Search of Excellence* authors noted that the North American Tool and Die Freezer Award (NAT&DFA) was an excellent tool for building morale, recognizing individual efforts and tying in senior management. The NAT&DFA was handed out once a month to the person

with the best continuous improvement idea that month. The award was a \$100 bill wrapped around a popsicle, stuck in the freezer of the employee's cafeteria. As simple as this sounds, it really was a rallying point for people on the last day of every month.

Try to get your senior leaders out of the meeting rooms. Engage them, encourage them and intrigue them. It'll work! 🍁

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### From the floor..

**QUESTION:** Twelve months ago, we started our Lean journey. It started off great, but then it fizzled out. What happened and how do we get back on track?

**ANSWER:** You haven't given me much to go on, but it is a question that I get asked a lot. So here we go with some answers!

**Lean is a project.** Once it gets called a project, then it has a start date, accountabilities and more importantly, an end date. Don't let them call your continuous improvement efforts "projects," even if they have the very best of intentions. Keep the accountabilities, the due dates, etc., but instill in people the sense that continuous improvement just keeps on going as part of your corporate culture.

**Lean efforts are not recognized.** Remember to have your hansei and yokotan discussions. Hansei discussions take place within the continuous improvement team right after they've delivered. You learn about what worked and what didn't, and no one has to reinvent the wheel. Yokotan discussions are when you talk about the initiative upwards and beyond your immediate group. Make sure that people hear about your Lean success story on more than the Lean board.

**Senior management hasn't bought in.** Sometimes senior managers are also CAVE people (Citizens Against Virtually Everything). Make sure that you've got the buy-in from your most senior people and the rest will follow through.

You may have just had bad luck, a poor facilitator or something else. Just because you tried it and failed, doesn't mean that you'll fail again. Try something different, try another value stream, and don't try to change it all at once. Try something more reasonable and make it stick.

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