

LEAN INSIGHTS

The great belt debate: How many people do I need to train?

By Dr. Timothy D. Hill

An organization is starting its Lean journey and wants to get people trained, but how many? And how many of each colour belt does an organization need? I get these questions on a fairly regular basis.

Let's start with the belt system. Years ago, there were no belts, and Lean was called kaizen. Since then, Lean has become a commonly accepted term, and continues to be embraced by those leading continuous improvement efforts.

Lean is still modelled after the Toyota Production System, but includes much more than just assembly line production practices. Lean has spread out into supply chain management, human resources, health care and much more.

Given the wide interest in Lean, some manner of credentials were bound to appear. Generally speaking, there is a four-tier belt system:

• **White belt:** This is the beginner level of Lean training. It's aimed at getting people proficient at understanding Lean concepts at a conversational level. I use it to introduce senior leadership to Lean, as well as to introduce Lean to a group that will go on to do the yellow or green belts. Typical training times are a half day to a full day.

• **Yellow belt:** Also a beginner's level, the yellow belt is aimed at getting people into a starting point where they can undertake a value stream mapping process and rank their interventions, deploy counter measures and realize sustainable goals. Typical training time is two full days.

• **Green belt:** The green belt participants oversee the work of yellow belts. Typical training time is five to six days, over a three-week period, with a project completed and dollar savings calculated.

• **Black belt:** The black belt participants oversee the green and yellow belts, and provide senior-level feedback about goal attainment. Typical training time is over six days, across six weeks, with a larger project completed and dollar savings calculated.

Some advisors suggest that 100 percent of the company receive white or yellow belt training. I agree, but urge them to do so in an orderly manner. As well, I usually urge them to consider a yellow belt so that they get some real continuous improvement opportunities from the value stream mapping, and start advertising their Lean successes. The yellow belts can start as real Lean champions, and help to build a real Lean momentum.

Don't rush into training everyone all at once. Do the training and then show the results from the training in order to convince the next group with data.

In the yellow belt training I conduct, we do the following:

- Root cause problem solving;
- Value stream mapping;
- Making kaizen stick; and
- VSM deployment.

The training is largely aimed at getting people to find permanent counter measures through the root cause work, and then leading them through the purposeful value stream mapping. The VSM is done to uncover actionable items that can be started right away. The early successes from the VSM are posted on a Lean board and serve as both hansei and yokotan discussion pieces. A hansei discussion happens within the kaizen team right after delivery

of the continuous improvement effort, while a yokotan discussion happens throughout the organization.



The yellow belt training provides the training for Lean continuous improvement. This is one of the most important training goals — beginning the process of enduring process change.

The green belts oversee this important process and support the yellow belts. The black belts co-ordinate these efforts with senior management, and work with the yellow and green belts.

In short, I recommend the following belt breakdown:

- White belt: 100 percent
- Yellow belt: 30 to 100 percent
- Green belt: Five percent
- Black belt: One to two percent

Whether or not your organization follows the above belt breakdown, you need to ask your training provider about how the training will transfer to your workplace. Ask the training professional if they:

- Follow a "train then do" training methodology that will maximize the transfer of training from the classroom to the work setting.
- Provide real, practical value stream mapping that leads real organizational change.
- Provide root cause problem solving that truly promotes finding the right actionable problem and not just a superficial "symptom."
- Encourage participants to act on one factor at a time so that the cause and effect can be clearly seen.
- Convince participants that many small continuous improvement steps are better than waiting for a large kaizen opportunity.
- Encourage participants to close the accountability loop by reporting out to the Lean board and continuing to audit and present key results. ♣

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From the book shelf

How the Mighty Fall and Why Some Companies Never Give In by Jim Collins

Jim Collins, author of *Good to Great* and *Built to Last*, looks at how previously great companies had subsequently lost their positions of prominence.

Collins provides five stages that detail the progression of the fall:

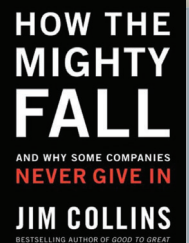
- Stage 1: Hubris born of success
- Stage 2: Undisciplined pursuit of more
- Stage 3: Denial of risk and peril
- Stage 4: Grasping for salvation
- Stage 5: Capitulation to irrelevance or death

Collins wrote: "We've come to see institutional decline like a disease: harder to detect but easier to cure in the early stages; easier to detect but harder to cure in the later stages. An institution can look

strong on the outside but already be sick on the inside, dangerously on the cusp of a precipitous fall."

The comparative and historical analysis yielded a descriptive model of how the mighty fall that consists of these five stages that proceed in sequence. Collins found that a company does not visibly fall until Stage 4. Companies can be well into Stage 3 decline and still look and feel great, yet be right on the cusp of a huge fall. Decline can sneak up on you and, seemingly all of a sudden, you're in big trouble.

I recommend *How The Mighty Fall*. I strongly suggest that readers place themselves along the stage continuum and read on about how they can escape their decline.



Question from the floor

QUESTION: My team introduced a kaizen event that lowered cycle time by more than 50 percent. Things were going well for about two weeks, and then cycle time started going up again. Do you have any suggestions for getting cycle time back down to where we had it?

ANSWER: Elsewhere in your letter you mentioned that you were measuring cycle time as you started, and that you kept posting it. My guess is that once you saw the reduction in cycle time hold after two weeks, you stopped posting it.

The key to building ownership for continuous improvement efforts is to close the accountability loop. To do this, you need to keep the gains visible, so go back to posting the cycle times. Have the people who are working on the continuous improvement effort frequently post the cycle times. As time goes by, reduce the monitoring frequency. Start daily and continue to post cycle times on a daily basis. After two to three weeks, post weekly cycle times. After six months, post cycle times monthly.

The idea is to keep the posting frequent while the change is new, and to shift to longer reporting intervals as the continuous improvement effort becomes the new standard work. Once it has become the new standard, you need to audit that process infrequently.

FOLLOW UP: The author of the question went back to posting the cycle time gains, regained the earlier reductions and kept on lowering the cycle times.

— Dr. Timothy Hill



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