



# Making the case for Lean

## It's more than just a toolbox

BY DR. TIMOTHY HILL

One question that I hear a lot is, "How do I convince my leaders to practice Lean?" I suspect that I hear this question for two reasons:

**1** Their leaders do not go to the gemba or their leaders do not believe in Lean. That's okay. You'll convince them with data and you'll get that data from your continuous improvement efforts.

**2** Very often they look at Lean as a technical problem. They want to move this machine here or change this design there, but they miss the point that Lean is about people. It's not about projects being forced on people. What they have is a leadership problem; not just a production or business problem.

Let's look at the second reason. Twenty percent of Lean successes come from the tools, while 80 percent come from culture change. How do we get that culture change? Glad you asked! The answer comes from having a critical mass of people who both think Lean and act Lean. Regardless of how much has been published about the topic, thinking Lean is not that obvious. Most people who observe their operations conclude that while they might understand this Lean concept very well, it just doesn't apply to their particular circumstance. They need help in seeing the

connection.

But as the more enlightened authors have pointed out, Lean is not simply a toolbox, but a total perspective. In other words, you must trust people to solve their problems, regardless of the way the problem has been defined. You cannot mandate from the office about what the Lean initiatives will be.

Plant managers, for example, typically define a problem as: hit your numbers, keep the factory loaded and avoid too many union or vendor problems. This effectively forces them to stay in their offices, manage by the numbers, run large batches and so on.

A Lean approach redefines the problem completely. Their new goals would be: produce only what has been consumed (or ordered), never bypass a problem or let an operator face a problem alone, and continuously improve all processes.

This has dramatic implications for the work of the plant managers. The only way to solve problems in this Lean perspective is to spend most of the time on the shop floor trying to understand what goes on, and challenging teams to improve their operations by getting the variability out.

In order to get started, people need to develop a Lean eye. They need to go to the gemba. But getting this discipline can be a

big hurdle for some. This is what folks call a moving target.

Consider this scenario: A material handler comes to pick up a container from the supermarket with a kanban card, but the container isn't there. The truck still needs to be prepared, so the system now tells the material handler to get the container from the safety stock. The truck gets prepared and all is well; at least on the surface.

What has happened is that no one has taken the time to figure out why the container isn't there. They are not using pull properly. The safety stock is being used for an inappropriate reason. If pull was being used correctly, the system would create the right tension that would force the material handler to solve the root cause. They would root cause solve to determine why the container was not there in the first place. That's Lean.

What happened in the above scenario is that the plant implemented a superficial level of Lean. They had the tools in place, but did not co-ordinate those tools in a larger corporate culture. They weren't thinking Lean. They were thinking, "How do I get this order out?"

Most of us would be impressed by the Lean tools at the hypothetical plant I've described — the kanban, the supermarket,

the truck preparation — and not see that all of this is failing to do what it's supposed to, which is solve problems. So learning to see is a pretty big challenge, both on the technical and people front, at whatever Lean level you are at.

The good news is that once you learn to see, it stays with you. 🍁

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### From the bookshelf

**Gary Connor. (2011). *Catapult The Cow*. Lean Enterprise Press.**

Author Gary Connor says that "there is no ideal or easy time to start your Lean journey. But this is sure: 'If you wait six months you will be six months further behind.'"

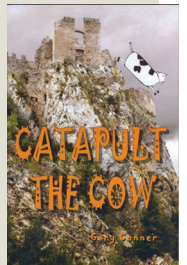
I completely agree! From there, he goes on to share more than 40 stories about Lean deployment with his clients. These stories are well told. They're engaging, they spell out what worked and why, and they avoid the superficial "kiss and tell" that has marked books since *In Search of Excellence*.

Companies in all markets are recognizing the need to apply Lean manufacturing techniques. Elimination of waste is critical to survival. North American companies have taken a beating since 1972. Connor says that North Americans have had more than 30 years to learn from Toyota, Honda, John Deere, Pella Windows and other world-class manufacturers.

"Unfortunately, the vast majority of U.S. companies stubbornly refuse to acknowledge that there could be a better way. Some take the stance that [if] 'the current process was good enough for Dad and Granddad, it's good enough for me,'" he writes.

When I tell people that tire mould change times are less than one minute in Yokohama, Japan, but more than eight hours in Indiana, they begin to see that there is a better way.

I will recommend this book to my North American clients who need to see where Lean has been taken to heart. They will learn that the challenges they face aren't unique to them. It's a good read — not too preachy and well worth whatever time you spend with it.



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