



What I learned from that...

BY DR. TIMOTHY D. HILL, PH.D., CLSSMBB, PMP

Early in my pilot days, I remember reading a magazine that had a backstory called “I learned a lot about flying from that.” I would flip over the magazine to read that column first, partly because it shared a lot and had a fair amount of “hangar flying” stories, but mostly because it made me a better pilot as I could stand on the shoulders of those that had gone before me. In that spirit, here’s my list of “what I learned from that” items from over the years!

This list comes from my observations of where Lean has really grown and taken off, plus those times where it hasn’t.

1. Yes, the tools are important, but Lean is more than tools

Lean’s successes are due to the culture changes and not the training in the tools. It’s about 80:20 in favour of the culture. I’ve seen trainers that spend all day on the tools when all their audiences need is how to do standard work, a 5S or something simple. They train on the tools because that’s an easy thing to do. They never talk about culture change, either driving it or sustaining it. It’s not as big an issue as some would have you believe, but you’ve got to include it. Nor are those that train on the tools very good at looking for waste in non-production areas like the office, sales, human resources or other areas. Yet all of these areas need Lean as well. I often tell my manufacturing clients that about half of their orders are late before they even start out on the production floor! They have become tied up in sales, engineering and other non-production areas.

2. Don’t expect continued success if you’re not continually supporting Lean

Lean is not a one-time, introduce it and leave it proposition. You will get out of it about what you put into it. If you do nothing, don’t expect a lot! Now, if you’ve got engaged people competing for the number of suggestions per month award plus you’ve got engaged leadership and you’re starting to build a Lean culture,

then you’ve really got something that will stick!

3. Lean works best if you keep the senior team in the gemba

The senior team is responsible for setting the strategic, stretch goals to be sure, but you want them out of the boardroom and down in the real place—the gemba. You want them to be close to those closest to production, to the customers, or whomever is important. In this way they can see the real problems, provide real coaching and see for themselves how employee suggestions are helping the company. What will likely happen is that they will set stretch goals that are grounded in reality.

4. Lean must evolve organically, not be forced down from above

I’ve noticed that when Lean fails, it very often fails because someone has tried to push it down from above. They’ll have project management people, performance management folks or just someone who went to a place where they had some Lean successes. These people do not allow Lean to evolve organically by building on one success after another and spreading out to other groups. Rather, they try to force a timetable, impose limits and bring levels

of bureaucratic overhead. If it’s not directly related to the doing of the work, then it’s overhead and should be eliminated. I’m quite harsh on this—if it’s overhead, eliminate it.

5. Don’t start off with quotas for the numbers of accepted suggestions per month

This is a little bit of carry-over from the one above, but I truly believe that you should not force the suggestion process with a quota for the number of suggestions per month. When I tell people about the number of suggestions a month that Toyota gets, for example, I am always cautious to mention that Toyota is a fully engaged and Lean workplace and that they get between one and several suggestions per person per month. It’s better to start off with a little bit of communication that lists each department’s number of suggestions per month and let some gentle competition take it from there! 🍁

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Question from the floor...

QUESTION: We’ve recently started our Lean board initiative. It started out really well and we got lots of suggestions. Now we’re in the second month and the number of suggestions has gone down. Can you help?

ANSWER: Is this just the second month? Please have some patience. It’s perfectly normal for the number of suggestions to drop off a little after the first month. Just make sure that you’re going around, checking in on them and helping where you can. Sometimes they don’t put up their suggestions because they’re a “just do it” item and those items never get put up on the board. In the rare case, they’ll be testing you to make sure that this “Lean thing” isn’t a flavour of the month. I once had a government office that started a Lean board and they told everyone that they could have \$500 of discretionary money to do project improvements. That fellow called me up and was a real lather! He said that the people wanted a coffee pot! I suggested to him that perhaps he was being tested and to allow them their coffee pot and to call me in two weeks. Well he did and he reported that everything was going very well once he passed their “test!” Give your people some support and give them some time.

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From the bookshelf...

***The Lean Startup: How Today’s Entrepreneurs Use Continuous Innovation to Create Radically Successful Businesses* by Eric Reis**

As soon as I read Marc Andreessen’s (founder of Netscape) review, I was captivated by this book. “Eric has created a science where previously there was only art. A must read for every serious entrepreneur—and every manager interested in innovation.”

It’s true, most startups fail and those failures are largely preventable. The book focuses on the familiar aspects of a Plan-Do-Check-Act cycle as a means of testing the vision continuously. In this way, it’s possible for them to take a small step, adapt and adjust their implementation all while still hitting their stretch goals. The stretch goals do not change, the leaders still rally the people around them but they allow the people to determine (for the most part) how to meet those stretch goals. This truly is a scientific approach to creating and managing successful startups, particularly in a time when companies need to be faster on their feet, bring more

radical innovative thinking to the table and stay ahead of the competition.

The book sidesteps all of the time wasted in planning. Let’s face it, most organizations plan themselves to death, rather than do something. It’s as if the PDCA cycle has become a PPPP cycle. If you’ve got something, do something. In this light, the Lean Startup brings about greater capital efficiency and does a better job of leveraging your human creativity.

It is inspired by lessons from lean manufacturing, relies on “validated learning” and rapid scientific experimentation. It brings forward a number of counter-intuitive practices that shorten product development cycles, measure actual progress without resorting to vanity metrics as well as brings forward the voice of the customer. Finally, it allows people to reach those stretch goals while empowering their people.

