

Lean Doesn't Stick Without Lean Leadership

By Dr. Kenneth Woodside and Murray Sittsamer

Pushing Lean Never Works for Long

Many companies have put a lot of effort into implementing Lean manufacturing principles to improve operational effectiveness and reduce costs. However, we have found that Lean doesn't go far or last long without Lean Leadership; which is the subject of this article.

Lean is a way of identifying and eliminating anything that does not add value to the design, production, or delivery of a product or service. This waste includes: time, energy, human effort, and other costs. Most Lean efforts start by adopting theory and training based on the Toyota Production System (TPS) into their own organization and installing the most visible aspects of Lean: Value Stream Mapping, 5S, Andon cords, 5 Why problem solving and Kanban cards. Unfortunately, most leaders are frustrated that they have not achieved the expected results.

While they have achieved some initial success from these efforts, many of these same organizations have struggled with leveraging and sustaining these gains over the long haul. They miss the part about engaging their workforce "into" Lean. You can push the tools – but you also have to lead and draw-in the people. Without Lean leadership from the top, management and the workforce often lose enthusiasm and support for their Lean initiatives and return to business as usual.

The Root of the Problem

There are two basic reasons for this common problem and they both have to do with the perceived role – and resultant behavior – of leadership in the organization, plant or business unit.

First, many executives mistakenly see Lean primarily as a set of tools and techniques that will provide a one-time quick fix to improve profitability or resolve a customer problem. In truth, Lean is an on-going, long-term organization-wide mindset to identify and remove waste from the process of producing a product or service.

The Lean toolkit helps to operationalize Lean, but Lean is more a way of thinking and leading than it is a set of tools and techniques.

The second and even more significant issue has been the failure to develop Lean leaders at all levels of the organization who understand their changing roles and responsibilities. The familiar command and control task management approach that "pushes" the implementation of tools to achieve immediate results is not as effective with the "pull" approach of Lean.

Lasting Lean initiatives require leaders who focus on developing and communicating a clear vision that "pulls" the organization. Lean Leadership engages its workforce in creating a new workplace culture that is centered on sustaining new methods and continuous improvement.

Do you Push or Do You Lead?

Traditional leadership pushes for results. Pressure for performance should not come at the expense of cultivating people to achieve desired performance. This change from push management to Lean leadership can be summarized in the following chart which contrasts the old and new approach.

Push Management	Lean Leadership
Maintaining status quo	Champion of change to support Lean process
Top down command and control	Communicating a compelling vision to create alignment
Working in competitive silos	Building cross functional collaboration to serve customers
Focus on production capital	Focus on both production and human capital
Force compliance	Lead by example to build trust
Task focus that looks only at results	Process focus that seeks results and continuous improvement
Micro-managing individuals and departments	Coaching individuals and facilitating teams
Firefighting and quick decision making	Pro-actively identifying and solving problems before they impact the process
Problem solving done by managers	Enabling individuals and teams to proactively solve problems
Avoiding failure and mistakes	Creating an organization that builds intellectual capital by learning from mistakes
Providing all the answers	Asking key questions to understand and guide thinking
Assuming or overlooking performance	Verifying and recognizing individual and team performance

Lean Leadership is the Catalyst for Improved Performance

It's not surprising that best practice companies view leadership as a process; not scripted, but specific behaviors that result in a workforce actively engaged in improving performance. When those key behaviors are missing, delayed, or done inconsistently the consequence is a huge (but hidden) waste of people's time, effort and talent.

The short-term and long-term benefits of Lean leadership are substantial. Have you considered what you need to do to hit performance targets and grow your business? If you're ready to accelerate your Lean initiative by transforming to Lean Leadership, let's talk about what you and your team need to do to achieve the full benefits of Lean.



Ken Woodside is principle consultant of *The Leadership Forum, LLC*, a consulting firm that assists leaders to develop and implement change strategies for improving bottom results. He has Bachelors, Masters degrees and a Doctorate in Organization Development and Psychology



Murray Sittsamer is president of *The Luminous Group LLC*, a training and consulting firm that helps company leaders become more effective and their organizations more efficient. He has a BS in Industrial Engineering and an MBA.