The Tortoise & the Hare
Slowing Down to Speed Up

Dear Drew,

I continue to encounter people and organizations either at the very beginning of their lean journey, or are 1-2 years in who ask how to accelerate the process. A previous newsletter titled "Step on It" conveyed several such stories. That newsletter generated quite a response, hitting a nerve with several readers - many positive, others negative. Since that newsletter I have encountered a few more organizations that went the 'drive-by kaizen' approach in an attempt to accelerate the process and the results. In each of these cases, dozens of rapid improvement events were conducted and facilitated by outside organizations. After 1 to 1-1/2 years and much money spent, each organization realized that the approach that they were taking was not sustainable. More specifically each realized that they did not adequately develop the internal resources to continue the effort after the outside consultants left.

I usually ask the question, "What was the plan to transfer the requisite knowledge and skill internally?" In most all cases there was no deliberate plan, but rather it was hoped to happen through 'osmosis' - individuals participating in the various kaizen events would pick it up over time simply through their periodic involvement. While benefits were certainly achieved during the numerous events conducted, the organization still did not have the internal capacity or capability after one year. This is a significant missed opportunity.

Another downside to the kaizen event based approach is that it misleads people and organizations to believe that this is the only approach to improvement. When I suggest alternative approaches to these

organizations the response is often one of surprise or even disbelief. While I have had this conversation numerous times, I wish to share one recent interaction that is representative. As part of the University of Michigan Lean Leadership program, students must initiate an A3 for a problem or process performance gap that they select. One participant, a Continuous Improvement professional from a financial institution, stated that her problem was "we need 8 more internal kaizen event facilitators." Her analysis of root cause for this 'gap' covered several issues such as compensation, reporting relationships and the like. I suggested that the lack of internal facilitators was not her problem, but rather a countermeasure to a problem. After some thought she said, "our problem is we need to conduct 55 kaizen events this coming year." At this point the rest of the class was catching on and someone suggested that this too was not a problem statement but rather a countermeasure. The 55 kaizen events were to solve what problems? Finally, the conversation turned to several key business performance issues or gaps that were the true problems.

Clearly there was a pre-disposition that facilitator-led kaizen events were the only acceptable approach to improvement. Other approaches like the idea of front-line leaders working with natural work teams or even cross-functional teams to close a gap in performance is foreign. "Our leaders would never go for that" was the student's response. In our April newsletter we covered the myriad of improvement methodologies (e.g. A3, Kata). I won't go into them again here. Nonetheless, I have said for decades that all roads must ultimately lead to supervisors, managers - leaders - driving continuous improvement in the natural course of conducting their 'running the business' duties. The CI professionals, Kaizen Promotion Office (KPO), Lean Champions, whatever term you choose to use, can all help, but they themselves will not be able to sustain the effort over time. Only those leaders 'where the rubber hits the road' can.

Envision an organization where most all leaders have the ability to facilitate various improvement efforts. Lean and Continuous Improvement could withstand budget cuts during difficult financial times when there is a tendency for many organizations to gut or disband their Lean or CI groups. The effort could withstand the departure of several key leaders in those groups or elsewhere in the organization who were the main drivers of change. These are just two common causes for a stalled or aborted 'lean

transformation', but you get the point that CI will be part of the 'fabric' of the organization's management system. It is true that this vision will take time to achieve, even years, but if this is the necessary and true destination then we should start down this path from the very beginning of a lean transformation.

But before you believe that actively engaging leaders from the start to facilitate improvement will delay the results to be achieved, let's consider the following scenario. Let's say that just 12 leaders were selected to deeply learn and apply a single improvement methodology, say the A3 process. Most certainly these leaders will need coaching throughout, either by internal or external resources. The 12 leaders will work with cross-functional and/or natural work teams to address a single problem or performance gap. Now, let's say that it takes ~3-4 months to complete a Plan-Do-Check-Act (PDCA) cycle (not atypical for A3s). The expectation is that each leader will select a new problem or 'gap' upon the successful completion of one. Therefore, each leader will work on 3-4 improvement initiatives in the course of the year, or collectively as a group 36-48. Of course the initiatives must be well chosen to provide substantive results, but that is a part of every improvement methodology (or should be).

An argument can be made that with this breath of practice timely results will be achieved during that first year, albeit over several months rather than weeks. Of equal (or greater) importance the organization will have capable internal resources to continue on with other improvement efforts with little or no formal coaching required at the end of the first year. Perhaps several of these leaders have demonstrated the ability to serve as coaches for the next 'wave' of learners and practitioners. The reader can see that the scenario provided is easily scalable to include more leaders in the first or subsequent 'waves'.

Now, let's say it is also desired to develop internal event facilitators (e.g. kaizen, value stream mapping). Instead of relying on 'osmosis', a select group of 4-6 individuals will participate in a deliberate and purposely designed facilitator 'train-the-trainer' program. This program could run concurrently with the aforementioned program for leaders. After just three to six 'cycles of learning' over the course of three to six months (the actual number will depend on program design) these individuals will have the ability to facilitate various forms of improvement 'events' with little or no coaching. The organization will have a pool of capable internal resources

from which it can 'tap' as the need arises. This scenario is also scalable and repeatable. The ~50 externally facilitated kaizen events that the aforementioned financial institution conducted before deciding to try it on their own were not just to 'get results'. They also represented opportunities to develop the abilities of internal resources, but only through a deliberate train-the-trainer program (and with said program far fewer than 50 events would be required). Unfortunately for many organizations that take the externally facilitated 'drive-by kaizen' approach they represent missed opportunities.

If the two described approaches are pursued concurrently think of where an organization could be after just one year, and not just results-wise but capability-wise as well. Think of the organization's ability to continue on after it has parted ways with the external resources. Consider the significant 'bandwidth' for CI that would have been created within the organization, beyond the Lean Office or KPO. So if you are considering a drive-by kaizen event approach or you have already been down that path, take a moment and consider what the true goal or destination is. It's not about conducting 55 kaizen events in a year, or whatever number has been thrown out there. It's something much more. Consider an approach where slowing down a tad will get you to that destination a whole lot faster. Aesop's fable "The Tortoise and the Hare" most certainly applies to every lean transformation. Which do you want to be?

Best Regards
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