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Step on it! Accelerating your lean transformation

Critical lessons that ensure a speedy culture change

BY DREW LOCHER

Leaders in organizations across industries are always looking to “speed-up” a lean transformation. This subject must be approached with great care. First, let’s define what it means to be practicing lean (the term “practicing” is deliberate). More and more people now understand that it is about creating a culture of continuous improvement (CI), and not about implementing a set of tools.

What does it take to transform a culture? Simply put, it requires time and a lot of practice. This is not the answer that leaders want to hear, but it is nevertheless true. It is possible to accelerate a lean transformation, not to “light speed” mind you, but perhaps to a speed faster than those organizations who went before. This can be done if—and it is a big if—we learn from the experiences of those organizations, adapt accordingly and begin in earnest with the right approach.

It’s about culture not tools

What are these experiences from which we can learn? Many organizations lament a flawed start to a lean transformation,

often describing the need to change approach after a difficult first one to three years. Often the cause of this is the aforementioned “tools approach,” and not understanding that the real objective is creating a CI culture.

Who defines culture in organizations? Its leadership. All roads will ultimately lead to front-line and middle managers working with their natural work groups to practice continuous improvement. Their behaviors and beliefs define local cultures within organizations. Therefore, front-line and middle management must be fully involved from the beginning. They have always been the key to success—and the biggest obstacle—to any major change effort. A strict tools approach without understanding this fact will slow your cultural change efforts.

Short-term performance results can be achieved with a tools approach, often in combination with a short-term “events approach” (discussion forthcoming). However, those gains are often unsustainable because those approaches do not help local leaders to fully understand or accept the underlying lean concepts.

There’s more to CI than events and projects

Another key lesson involves the event-based approach to implementing change. Many organizations take a rapid-improvement- or kaizen-event based approach. Resources from outside the

area in which change is being made often facilitate such events. They can be external consultants or individuals from the organization’s Kaizen Promotion Office (KPO), lean group—whatever title they may have. There is some benefit to this approach, as the events demonstrate that change can happen quickly.

A “project approach” is similar. CI projects typically involve a cross-functional team and take place over several months. Again, there is benefit to this approach, as it allows for more complicated problems to be addressed over time. However, you will not quickly achieve the cultural change if you continue to depend on tool-, event- or project-based approaches.

These approaches fail because they are episodic. They alone do not provide adequate opportunity for the learners to *practice* process improvement, which is required to quickly develop the requisite skills and mindsets. Research shows that it takes a minimum of four to seven repetitions to *begin* to store any learning to short-term memory. Further, people can forget up to 70 percent of what they learn if they do not use what they’ve learned within a few weeks. The expression “if you don’t use it, you lose it” has much truth to it. Less frequent practice means more time will be needed to develop the desired skills and mindsets.

In how many events or projects can an individual be directly involved in a period of time, say a year? Full-time lean



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facilitators or Six Sigma Black Belts may have the time, but remember the target is front-line and middle management.

The good news is that there are other approaches to CI that don't involve cross-functional teams conducting multi-day events, or long-term projects. Having front-line and middle managers work with their natural work team every day to make small changes (some refer to this practice as “kata”) will provide the opportunities to practice what they've learned. But it must be deliberate practice that follows a prescribed approach to Plan, Do, Check, Act (PDCA). Unfortunately, these smaller scale opportunities are frequently overlooked, because organizations insist on going for “big wins.”

Leaders have to lead

Another concern with externally facilitated events or projects is that the local leaders often delegate responsibility for the effort to the facilitators. The local leaders are more than happy to do so, particularly at the beginning of a lean transformation initiative. Often under the guise of not having time, their true intent is to keep the effort at arm's length, with the belief that by doing so they will avoid being associated with what they think might be a failed endeavor. The facilitators are often willing to oblige, as it justifies their roles (and employment) over time. It's a win-win situation for both parties.

However, once again, in this situation, the local leaders will not develop the necessary skills and mindsets that are necessary for achieving cultural change. Worse still is that the changes made most likely will not be sustainable when the lean facilitator or Six Sigma Black Belt moves on to another area. Frankly,

the lean group or six-sigma folks just do not have enough capacity to provide the coaching that's necessary over time to develop the process-improvement and problem-solving skills of *all* front-line and middle managers.

Narrow and deep is better than broad and shallow

Too often organizations in their attempt to accelerate a lean transformation take a “broad and shallow” approach. This means that all associates are involved early in the effort, often beginning with everyone being trained. The key front-line and middle managers are included in wave after wave of training. The benefit of this approach is that it provides a strong introduction to CI, raising the general awareness of the concepts. However, if the participants do not have sufficient opportunities to properly apply what they have learned, much of the learning likely will be lost over time.

A “narrow and deep” approach involves training a limited number of participants, coupled with opportunities to deepen their learning through practical application. As each small group demonstrates sufficient understanding, then another group of individuals is identified and given the same training. This approach better assures sustainable change as the leaders learn what is truly required to continuously coach people in their work group. Given that the number of participants at any one time is limited, effective coaching can be provided. Further, early participants can serve as coaching resources as the effort expands to involve more individuals in the organization. To be clear, we are referring to front-line and middle managers coaching their peers.

Develop internal capability ASAP

At the beginning of a lean transformation, many organizations make use of outside resources. In the absence of internal experience and knowledge, this is typically necessary. However, the objective at the outset must be to develop internal capability as quickly as possible. This can be done through a deliberate “train-the-trainer” program. Experience has shown that an individual can develop sufficient facilitative capability in approximately six months. Such train-the-trainer programs are based on proper instructional design concepts, and a “narrow and deep” approach.

Tools can be taught, consultants can be hired, events can be held, but without front-line staff and middle management involvement and buy in, no process improvement initiative would ever work. This was true with Meritus Health in Hagerstown, Maryland, according to Sara Abshari, the organization's manager, operations improvement.

“After five years of consultants and teaching the fundamentals of lean (which please don't get me wrong, I do believe are necessary to know and understand), we had no sustainment, no collaboration between departments and units and no real lean culture,” Abshari said. “It was only when continuous improvement and the meaning behind daily practice was explained that individuals started to understand what lean means.”

Abshari added that practices like Kata and kaizen events will only work if there is daily follow up with experiments. “It's only when you apply the change that you can see how it impacts your flow,” she said.

“The easiness and simplicity of Kata was what got staff's buy in,” Ashari said. “Today, more than 44 departments at Meritus are continuously working on various initiatives, many of which no longer need coaching from operational improvement.”

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