

Reasons Why Improvement Efforts Fail

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While interviewing golfer Jack Nicklaus, a reporter once asked, “Jack, you’ve had a spectacular career. Your name is synonymous with the game of golf. You really know your way around the course. What’s your secret?” Nicklaus replied, “The holes are numbered.”

Unfortunately there are no handily numbered steps we can follow to achieve the goals of quality, productivity, and competitive position. Consequently, the opportunities for failure are many and the ineffectiveness of improvement initiatives are common. While some companies in the printing and converting industries have been hugely successful in their improvement efforts, many have tried only to experience modest gains that seem to slip away over time. Many more end up in the “swamp.”

Staying out of the Improvement Swamp

In reflecting on my thirty-five years as a teacher, writer, and consultant on continual improvement I’ve found some failure factors common to those companies ending up in the “swamp.” Here are a few that I’ve encountered in companies attempting to implement a Lean manufacturing approach.

Too much emphasis on Lean tools and not enough on Lean thinking. The central purpose of Lean is to maximize customer value while minimizing waste. Simply put, Lean means creating more value for customers with fewer resources. A Lean organization understands customer value and focuses its key processes to continuously increase it. The ultimate goal is to provide perfect value to the customer through a perfect value creation process that has zero waste. Tools and methods like 5S, makeready reduction, and value stream mapping among others, are important and necessary to eliminate the seven wastes. However, an approach that focuses on tools to the near exclusion of “Lean thinking” frequently leads to limited and temporary gains. Employees need to understand the seven wastes; their impact on cost, quality, and cycle times; and to learn to see them in their work areas. Employees who can see the

workplace through “Lean glasses” become much more effective in the application of Lean tools and methods. Eliminating waste along entire value streams, instead of at isolated points, creates processes that need less human effort, less space, less capital, and less time to make products and services at far less costs and with much fewer defects, compared with traditional business systems. Companies are able to respond to changing customer desires with high variety, high quality, low cost, and with very fast throughput times.

Lack of resources to train and assist employees. Employees at all levels need training to help develop awareness and understanding of Lean practices, their purpose, and how they fit into the company’s strategy. Workers also need training and coaching on how to apply the tools of Lean in a way that will generate the desired results. This is best supplied in a “train-do” approach where workers learn the tools and methods while applying them to real problems in their work areas with the guidance of knowledgeable trainers or coaches. When done properly, this type of training leads to workers who can apply the tools on their own when and where they’re needed. The concepts and tools are not difficult to learn, but people do need help in understanding the what, why, when, and how of their application. Companies that fail to provide the needed training and coaching to workers should not be surprised to experience very limited and temporary results.

Insufficient use of employee brainpower. There is a reason why Taiichi Ohno, the father of Lean manufacturing, stated that the eighth and perhaps greatest waste was underutilization of employees. Companies often fail to recognize the potential that exists in the experience and innovation of their workers for accelerating their improvement efforts. Companies that have excelled in quality and process improvement routinely look to solve problems and drive out waste at the lowest levels, recognizing that those closest to the problems most often are best positioned to solve them. They

practice the problem-solving approach of “creativity before capital.” Managers and supervisors act as coaches to help employees solve problems as needed. This not only leads to effective solutions but also advances the learning of the worker, improving their effectiveness. Instead, many companies in the printing and converting industry still leave the authority for solving problems and directing kaizen activities almost exclusively in the hands of managers, limiting the use of employee brainpower.

Too much focus on scheduled kaizen events and not enough on daily improvement. Targeting major problems by scheduling and holding three-, four-, or five-day kaizen events is a common Lean practice. And it’s shown to be an effective way to achieve significant improvement quickly in the targeted area. However, such events are inherently limited in number due to the resource demands of time and people. Therefore, companies that primarily rely on major kaizen events are placing limits on their rate of improvement. When all employees become knowledgeable and capable of applying improvement methods, are encouraged to practice them daily, and are rewarded and recognized when they do, the rate of improvement is nearly unlimited. In this approach, improvements are based on many small changes rather than on only radical changes. Also, as the ideas come from the workers themselves, they are likely to be simpler, easier to implement, and less costly. Overreliance on kaizen events can lead to a “home run” mentality, which are far and few between. Small improvement actions by everyone, everyday, everywhere is the energy that drives companies to high levels of organizational excellence. The essence of Lean management is that each individual employee is given the opportunity to find problems in his own way of working, to solve them, and to make improvements.

Insufficient communication. Beginning a journey into Lean practices is very much about change: changing the way you think and changing the way things get done. You can’t get improvement without change. And with any change initiative, clear and frequent communication is essential. People need to hear what is expected, how it is to be achieved, how well they’re doing, and how much it is benefiting the organization, and they need to hear it often. In many companies, expectations, accountability, and results (EAR) are rarely shared or known. Imagine sitting at a basketball game where the scoreboard is not working. You have no clear idea who’s ahead or how much time is left. Without that information, it’s nearly impossible to “get in the game.” Based on my own experience, I’ve developed a rule of thumb for communicating to employees about improvement initiatives. Take whatever you think is needed to

adequately communicate to employees the improvement activities being implemented and multiply it by 100 and maybe it will be enough. I know of no Lean manufacturing initiatives that have suffered from overcommunication, but there are many that have suffered from too little communication.

Lack of a strategic deployment plan. To play on an old axiom, failing to plan for the application of Lean manufacturing is planning to fail in Lean manufacturing. Relative to improvement in the printing industry, there is a tendency to try things out capriciously without an in-depth grasp of their underlying foundation and without the commitment necessary to sustain them. Consequently, it’s not surprising that a common failure factor in Lean manufacturing is the absence of a strategic plan of deployment. Without a strategic plan, management and workers will likely be unclear on the goals and objectives, the metrics to be used, the time demands necessary, the type and amount of resources needed, and the expectations for results. It’s like taking a trip without a map or a plan. Focus is hard to achieve, resulting in improvement efforts that are disconnected from the burning issues that keep senior managers awake at night. Improvement for the sake of “making things better” may lead to some gains, but not in the right areas nor at the necessary levels. Moreover, the lack of a strategic deployment plan makes it impossible to know the demands that will be placed on employees for their involvement and impossible to know what and how many resources will be needed to obtain the desired results.

Lack of Standard Work practices. All improvement begins with standardization. When a work task is not defined by a Standard Work practice, there can be no basis for comparison before and after an “improvement” was introduced. Therefore, it’s difficult to objectively determine if there was in fact a beneficial change made. Standardization feeds improvement in that there is a state of consistency which makes it much easier to improve upon. The new improvements, verified through measurement, become the new standard only long enough for somebody to come up with an even better way. When a specific task is defined by standard practice and that standard has not changed for several months, it’s evidence that no improvement is occurring in that activity. Simply getting everyone to follow the current standard means you are missing opportunities to get better. You are failing to take into account how things are changing and the waste inherent in all processes. There needs to be substantial flexibility in allowing workers to make creative improvements along the way. Standards should not be developed and then communicated from upper management to all departments. Rigid standards will kill continual improvement. Let individuals involved

in the specific work activities decide what they will do to fix their problems and close performance gaps.

Lack of top management understanding, commitment, and participation. When you really dig into it, the basic reason why the implementation of Lean fails at most companies boils down to culture—the corporate culture and how the company is led and managed from the top. What most leaders fail to realize is that Lean is a management philosophy, not simply a collection of tools for material and information flow or problem solving. Most business leaders either do not understand its value or do not have the patience and control to implement it. Too many printing companies are still looking for the “big bang” project or turbo-charged effort of their employees. They all sound good and come with great fanfare or personal sacrifice, but they are usually not sustainable. Slow, steady continuous improvement does not lead to immediate recognition, quick gains, or big profits. Successful implementation requires something that is rare in both people and organizations—constancy of purpose. However, if you stick with it, it’s amazing how the little day-to-day improvements add up. After a few months, you look back and realize how much has been accomplished.

Conclusion

I remember meeting employees during visits to Honda and Toyota plants in the U.S. more than ten years ago. I expected to meet really outstanding individuals. Those companies do employ good people,

but what I found were people like myself working in a structure that elevated their efforts and supported their success. The companies created an environment that allowed ordinary people to achieve extraordinary results over time, by having consistent direction and standardized work processes, both in the office and on the shop floor. Citing one of the principles of W. Edwards Deming, their success was more dependent on process than the heroic efforts of an individual person. Today, achieving quality, productivity, and competitive position is very much tied to achieving a rate of improvement that is greater than the competition. Remember, any company can purchase the same equipment, materials, and facilities that you have, but they can’t buy your rate of improvement. Learning from the failed or limited Lean implementations of other companies outlined here can help you minimize missteps. The principles, methods, and tools of Lean manufacturing are not complicated, but to achieve sustained results in productivity, costs, quality, and customer satisfaction demands dedicated time, resources, and energy. Make no mistake: A lot of work is required. Whoever wants significant and sustained results has to face the fact that the required effort adds substantially to the workloads of participating employees, including upper managers.

John Compton will be speaking at the Continuous Improvement Conference, April 10–13, in Kansas City, Missouri, on “Ten Reasons Why Improvement Efforts Fail.” For more information on the conference visit www.printing.org/ciconference. John Compton can be reached at 239-405-7177 or spc1946@yahoo.com.

Continued from page 16

enterprise will be ready to undertake an aggressive conversion to Lean in early autumn.

Achieving Enterprise Excellence

A company’s journey to visuality can span two to five years and touch every level and operation in an enterprise, including office and support functions. One of the problems of the rush to Lean is that some companies are faced with cultural barriers that require resolution before Lean outcomes can be undertaken. Many Lean aficionados may disagree and recommend you first bulldoze an environment into the future by aggressive and repeated blitz applications. But even applications of the modest visual *where* can transform an otherwise recalcitrant workforce into one that is aligned, ready, and even eager for Lean.

The Lean paradigm alone will not take you the distance to enterprise excellence. The outcome you seek is not a Lean enterprise but a visual-Lean enterprise. Determining and then improving a product’s critical path represents a vital improvement outcome, but it is only one of them. The enterprise on its way to excellence needs to address both Lean and visual tasks equally.

To learn more, Gwendolyn is speaking at the Continuous Improvement Conference, April 10–13, in Kansas City, Missouri. For more info visit www.printing.org/ciconference. Gwendolyn Galsworth, Ph.D. is founder and president of QMI/Visual-Lean® Institute, a training, consulting, and development firm, specializing in the technologies of the visual workplace. With nearly thirty years in the field of visuality, Dr. Galsworth is author of a number of books, including: Visual Systems, Visual Workplace Associate Handbook, Visual Workplace/Visual Thinking (Shingo Prize Research Recipient), Smart Simple Design, and the newly released, Work That Makes Sense. For more information, visit: www.visualworkplace.com.