



Lean Is Not a Toolbox

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Are you happy when you take a medicine you don't have to?

So, why are you satisfied with your Kanban*?

***Kanban: Method that uses visual cards (kanban, in Japanese) to manage an inventory in order to connect processes.**

Nick just had his wisdom teeth removed and was in a lot of pain, until he took the miraculous medicine Tooth On. Johnny, his smart classmate, did some research and soon learned positive things about Tooth On. His research included the internet, pharmaceutical articles, doctor's endorsements, and so on. All he learned was good. Tooth On really made a fast difference in the users. It was easy to get and to take. Several patients were taking and liking it. Soon, Johnny was convinced that he too should take Tooth On. Its endless proven benefits allied to the abundant information on that medicine facilitated his decision to take it. He only forgot to ask the fundamental question: Do I have the same problem Nick has?

That night, Johnny tried a dose of Tooth On. Before going to bed, Johnny had a huge headache. He couldn't figure out if that was due to his late salad dinner or the stress from the finals at college. The medicine he took was never in question: "Of course not, it worked for Nick," he thought. Johnny then decided to stop eating salad at dinner. As the wise man once said, "The problems of today are solutions from the past." Can the corollary be that "The solutions of today will be the problems of the future?"

Over the years, the mutation in Lean has been interesting. What took Toyota decades to perfect is being studied today by other companies, so it can be perfected even further. Why is it that so many companies fail in copying Toyota? There is an abundance of material written on the Toyota Production System (TPS):

- Dictionaries for those who want to know what each tool is
- Articles explaining the benefits of using each tool
- Books showing step by step how to implement each tool

The fallacy of the TPS tools is that while they are proven to be great for Toyota, they are more often than not misused by companies that just copy them. A common mistake is the use of Kanban itself. Unfortunately, most Lean implementers have associated Lean with Kanban implementation. Many books made people believe that using Kanban was similar to being Lean.

Meanwhile at Toyota operations, the pursuit of Kanban elimination takes place daily. For Toyota veterans, Kanban is like a plague that must be kept from proliferating. Other senior Toyota senseis would equate Kanbans to medicine: you only take them when you really need them. Kanbans are still perceived as a statement of failure to connect processes, which is essential to creating flow.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sammy learned and implemented the Toyota Production System (TPS) at Toyota facilities in Japan, Brazil, Venezuela, and in the United States. He has taught Lean to a multitude of consulting firms, educational organizations such as Harvard and Stanford, and even in humanitarian missions thru Asia and Africa. With a Master's Degree in Technology Management, he also is a faculty member with the Lean Institute and an instructor of Global Strategy Management for the California Community College system. He is a guest lecturer on Lean for post-graduate classes at Stanford University and San Diego State University and has been a speaker at conferences sponsored by the American Production and Inventory Control Society, the Association for Productivity and Quality (APQ), and the American Society for Quality (ASQ). He currently aids companies implementing Lean through Honsha.ORG.

Whenever you have an artificial method to connect processes, you are creating a flow impediment. Conceded, there are cases where connecting processes is not yet possible: cases such as processes that are shared as opposed to exclusive, or when cycle times are not flexible, or when there are physical limitations due to the nature of processes.

What makes such a tool so appealing? Maybe it is the avalanche of new books that keep popping up with shiny covers or Lean workshops being announced under catchy names. And in the heat of the moment, the Kanban fever makes us all believe we are getting closer to excellence.

As for Johnny, he is now taking a double dose of Tooth On and since the headache doesn't get any better, he eliminated salad from his diet.

May the abundance of cure never make us forget what caused the disease. May the abundance of tools never make us forget what caused the problem.