

Lean Project Implementation is not an adoption

I was speaking today with the CEO of a large construction firm that has been on a journey to deliver their projects on a lean basis for the last 8 years. We were speaking about the usual comments senior people make about lean. He said, "Don't paper the projects; you need to change your practices to deliver a lean project." In other words, going through the motions won't make the project lean. But what will make it lean?

You need to change your practices to deliver a lean project. Doing a project lean is not an implementation issue. Rather, it is about adopting a different set of behaviors. Behaviors are an individual issue. Each person has to decide that they will approach their work differently. This is the bad news. It's also the good news. Why? There's really nothing to implement. My colleagues (and clients) might disagree. So be it. The fundamental issue is for people to approach their work with a new attitude and a new commitment.

The new attitude is to make today better than yesterday. You've probably heard something like that before. I was in a plant where I saw a sign that read, "Make tomorrow better than today." That is not what is really going on at lean firms. We can't wait for tomorrow. We only know that we have today. Toyota calls it a no-satisfaction attitude. It's the complete opposite of complacency.

Only unwavering leadership will set the stage for adoption. The new commitment is to learn in-the-moment from each anomaly, variance and breakdown. I don't mean doing a lessons-learned at the end of the project. That's a waste. Rather, each little difference from expectations is exactly that opportunity to learn what we need to learn. A few years ago I had the opportunity to speak with Gary Convis, who was the Toyota North American President of Manufacturing. He was asked about the importance of advanced problem-solving approaches. In short, he answered, "The vast majority of improvements (Toyota) makes — over 80% — start and finish with a good 5-why." He went on to explain it is the habit at Toyota to notice small variances, to stop and understand why they occurred, and to do something in that moment to prevent recurrence (install countermeasures).

"Lean this" and "lean that" are not issues of implementation. Last Planner® will not make you lean. Nor will kanban, kaizen events, single-piece flow nor 5S. Even doing all of them on your project won't make you lean. Lean — true lean — happens in the minds and actions of each person in the organization. To pull that off takes the determined unwavering examples of leaders. Only that leadership will set the stage for adoption.

Hal Macomber, Project Reformer

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Lean Projects are defined by Lean Behaviours

I follow numerous blogs, news groups and twitter posts on lean. I've noticed a change in the last few months from talking about lean tools to talking about lean behaviors. It's a refreshing change. Toyota made a shift early this century in the way they spoke about their approach. In essence, they started speaking about the Toyota Way vs. the Toyota Production System. Under the TPS, the two pillars were Just-in-Time production and Jidoka (autonomation). Now they speak about the two pillars of *continuous improvement* and *respect for people*. It's a shift from tools to tool users. I don't think that Toyota made a big shift in the way they manage. Rather, they noticed something different about what they do on an everyday basis. It's exactly that noticing that we all should pay attention to for our own operations.

Lean is a mindset. It's not a set of practices. Greg Howell, my colleague and business partner, characterizes lean as a constant focus on learning...learning from everything that happens on an everyday basis. Lean companies are learning faster than their competitors. But what does that mean? How do they do that? Steven Spear, co-author of [Decoding the DNA of the Toyota Production System](#) and author of [Chasing the Rabbit](#), offers an insight on what Toyota and other lean companies are doing.

Spear identifies 4 capabilities of lean companies.

1. Design processes in a way that participants in the process see opportunities for learning. Make anomalies, incidents and problems jump out in the process of performing the work.
2. Swarm the anomalies, incidents and problems. Bring people quickly together at the site of the problem, with the people who were present to the problem, and immediately when the problem occurs. The intent is to study the incident (problem) to get to the [root cause](#). It's all about learning.
3. Share what you learn with all relevant parties in your company. Do it immediately. Do it extensively.
4. Lead the company in a way that others develop the above three capabilities. In other words, create people who are intent on learning everyday from what is occurring while doing the everyday work of the company.

Pretty straight forward. Not so easy to do,

What can we do on our projects? Some will say that project managers and others who coordinate the work on projects are already dealing with the anomalies and problems on projects. Just ask a [construction](#) superintendent what he does at the beginning of every day. He's apt to tell you that he's figuring out how he will get yesterday's work done. But that is not what I am writing about. There is an approach for getting project work done every day. It's the [Last Planner® System \(LPS\)](#). The [LPS](#) brings stability to projects so that project managers and coordinators are freed to focus on the future. They are also available to use their ingenuity and time to address the little things and not-so-little things that come up everyday. It's time they have to swarm, learn and share that learning with others that sets them apart from most project managers.

Oh...one last thing...the big opportunity that lean companies and projects demonstrate is managers-as-teachers. The primary role of anyone that is managing or leading others

is to build the competence of the people doing the everyday work. It's not problem-solving. It's not directing the work. It's not checking on others. All that can be done while doing the work. Lean companies put their attention on learning at every chance they can. It's a behavior change.

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