

## Lean Culture Change

As a Lean Six Sigma Black Belt working for a Management Consultancy, I spend most of my time leading improvement projects in clients' businesses.

Naturally, as someone from outside the organisation who has been brought in to do a specific job, it is very important to define clearly what the aims and objectives of the piece of work are, and they need to be measurable. That way, when the work is complete, both the client and Bourton Group are satisfied that what we originally aimed to achieve matches what ultimately happened.

Operating within a very clear set of boundaries is a little different to the way I learnt my role as an improvement professional, working for nine years for a big American corporation that was rolling out Lean Six Sigma globally.

This is because in those days people with my job were not just responsible for achieving the aims of their projects, but also for transforming the culture of the organisation.

This meant that alongside our projects we also did a lot of training, mostly at White Belt or Yellow Belt level, helping people throughout the organisation understand the concept of Lean, and encouraging them to apply it themselves.



Recently, while leading a workshop for a client, I had a stark reminder of why the second approach can be so beneficial to an organisation. While I was mapping a process as part of a big project to improve the client's support services, an HR Administrator in the team estimated that she spends 25% of her working week at the printer, printing documents which form live case files. As we followed the process through, it became apparent that rather than storing all this paper when it was finished with, they sent it to a third-party company who scanned it, shredded it and provided a digital archive of the files.

To anyone with even a little knowledge of the core principles of Lean (waste analysis, understanding inputs and outputs) this process would seem almost comical – one of the required outputs is digital files, one of the inputs is digital files, but the process involves spending a lot of time turning them into paper, and a lot of money turning them back again. Therein lies the point though – this major improvement project with very clearly defined, high level cost reduction goals, was happening in an organisation where most people did not have any Lean knowledge.



This unnecessary processing reminded me of a similar situation I once uncovered in a very different work environment – a gas plant in the Middle East where an operator spent several hours per week at a machine mixing red and white paint, because there were cylinders he needed to paint pink. We called the supplier and they sold pink paint, it was the same price as red or white, it was just that no one had ever thought to buy any.

One of my favourite quotes is from Lean guru W. Edwards Deming, I always used to include it in White Belt training. He said “Eighty-five percent of the reasons for failure are deficiencies in the systems and processes rather than the employee. The role of management is to change the process rather than badgering individuals to do better”.

Neither the HR Administrator or the guy mixing paint were arriving at their workplace each morning intending to do a bad day’s work, in fact in both cases I’m completely convinced they were extremely diligent employees doing their very best in the circumstances in which they found themselves. Crucially though, in both cases they had either never been trained to identify waste within a process, or they simply didn’t feel empowered to make or suggest any changes.

In the case of the HR Administrator, it struck me that the project I am working on could feasibly achieve its goals, with a significant reduction in effort and cost related to support services, and I could leave there with both the client and Bourton Group happy, but with that lady still spending 25% of her time at the printer. This is because when a big improvement project is run in isolation, although it might have the side effect of impacting the way some of the team members approach their jobs, the organisation as a whole risks only being better because that specific aim has been achieved. Culturally, it will still be the exact same place as it was before the project started, what has occurred will have been an improvement, but not Continuous Improvement.

Back in my days in a big corporation I would have made a point of booking some of my time to work with that lady, analysing the waste in her day step by step, and working with her and others in her role to create an action plan to address it. It wouldn’t have helped me with my own objectives, saving one person a few hours per week was not going to win me any awards, but it would just have been the right thing to do. Maybe a few other people would hear about it too and start making their own changes – the knock-on effect of changing the way people think about the processes they follow, although not very measurable, could have a far bigger impact for the organisation than one project, however successful.

#### **Conclusion**

When big companies engage management consultants to lead improvement projects, the tendency will always be to focus their time on the problem that needs solving, thereby ensuring the best possible financial return on the cost of having them there.

Many would benefit from taking a leap into training and coaching their workforce alongside the improvement work though.

The question they have to ask themselves is which would they prefer; to solve the problem that they have identified and move on, or to solve the problem and also change their organisation’s culture, meaning problems like that are less likely to occur in the future.

If you would like to find out more about this subject, or how we can help make your business, better then give us a call on 01926 633333, or email us at [info@bourton.co.uk](mailto:info@bourton.co.uk).