

Lean is driven from the top, otherwise it's likely to fall apart

One of the most common mistakes made by companies implementing Lean is to assume that the theory is only relevant up to a certain level in the organisation structure.

Lean is commonly perceived as heavily involving shop floor level improvements, and rightly so, but one of the biggest challenges for Lean Facilitators is helping senior managers understand their role in ensuring those changes are both achieved and sustained.

The most obvious element of Management's responsibility towards successful implementation of Lean is to promote the concept. Every employee communication session and newsletter should include an update on Lean implementation and performance.



Department and individual KPIs should be introduced relating to the key measures which need to be improved, and the best performers should be publicly rewarded.



All of this involves a shift in the Management's own behaviour, and if it doesn't happen that can have a negative effect on the Lean implementation. If a manager is always seen to ultimately prioritise business as usual over Lean initiatives, that message will filter down through the organisation and Lean will become a nice-to-have. If a manager says the right things about Lean ways of working on the shop floor but their own office is a mass of stacked boxes and ancient paperwork, it will be clear where their priorities really lie.

Encouraging this change of attitude in Management can be a bigger challenge for a Lean Facilitator than the shop floor implementation.

Ultimately, the people on the shop floor don't want to be inefficient and they can see how small changes can make a big difference to the company. They just need some guidance and structure to make it happen. The Managers, however, are likely to consider themselves busy enough as it is and can challenge whether a 5S event in the Board Room is really a good use of their skills and time.

I remember once as a Lean Facilitator a conversation, much longer than it needed to be, with a Finance Director who was questioning why I had allocated him 15 minutes every two months to do a 5S audit in the Paint Shop. The fifth 'S' is Sustain, and I knew that if the company was really going to make a success of its 5S program, the shop floor personnel needed to see with their own eyes that the Senior Management were bought into it.

That conversation was a good reminder why "the ability to communicate with people at all levels", a phrase copied and pasted onto a thousand CVs, really is a key requirement for a Lean Six Sigma Practitioner. It was just as difficult telling the HR Director that she had the audits in the Goods In department, but after some persuasion they both did it.

That visibility, with Management making a concerted effort to be seen to support Lean implementation, is actually the easy part of their involvement.

Next comes the realisation that, although those basic Lean principles embedded in techniques like 5S are essential, they will only take you so far where business improvement is concerned. You cannot successfully solve issues like unsatisfactory quality or lead time in an environment where there is excessive searching or movement, however these are unlikely to be the root cause. Once basic Lean principles are in place, you can start looking for the real root cause of these issues, and they are very likely to be somewhere else in the business. Now the Managers move from having to show support for changes in the business, to recognising that those changes may actually directly affect them. This can be a surprise

Here is where Lean techniques, and conclusions on performance backed up by data, may begin to reveal some uncomfortable truths about the company and its processes. Blaming the shop floor for poor performance is easy and it often seems self-evident, after all production is the last step before delivery to the customer, so if it was quicker the customer would get what they wanted sooner. You've only got to look at the state of the place to realise that's where the problems lie.

Once the state of the place is sorted out though, the source of the problems can be closer to the Managers who struggled with their role in promoting Lean than anyone realised. Back at the company with the reluctant Finance Director, I also had many long meetings with the Procurement Manager, taking him through data demonstrating that almost 50% of failure to meet dates promised to the customer was due to parts from suppliers not being available on time. His initial reaction was not really to the data itself, it was astonishment that I had seen fit to approach him with such an issue. He knew they had issues with suppliers, but what had that got to do with the Lean Facilitator? Shouldn't I be on the shop floor encouraging people to keep their cupboards tidy?



Conclusion

Of course, nobody should go into Lean Facilitation expecting it to be easy or be under any illusion about the fact that one of the hardest parts of the job is indirectly managing people. These will be people at all levels in the organisation. People who don't have to do what you say, but who will when persuaded that it's the best course of action. It is also essential that everyone in the organisation appreciates Lean is as much cultural as it is practical. If you try to implement it with shop floor operators and supervisors only, things might look a bit better when you have visitors on site, but you will be using up resources while missing the opportunity to make significant improvements to your organisation.

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.