

Overcoming reluctance to buy-in to Lean



Your Business. Better.

All Lean practitioners know that success with improvement projects will only come if they have the buy-in of the people involved.

When you make changes to processes, if the people involved do not understand why those changes are happening, disagree with the need for the change, or believe the wrong changes are being made, then once the project is over and the attention moves elsewhere they will go back to working exactly how they did beforehand. Once this has happened, rather than eliminating waste, all the effort put into the improvement project was waste itself.

Employees are stakeholders too!

The employees are one of Lean's three key stakeholders (the others being the management and the customers). This is why the employees need to feel like there is something in it for them, so improvements need to be designed with the employees' requirements in mind. Fortunately, the proper application of Lean techniques usually results in improved working conditions for the people.

For example, a working environment that has been the subject of a [5S event](#) is a more pleasant place to operate, a process with waste removed gives people a greater sense of purpose and a feeling that they are personally contributing to the success of the company, rather than just doing what they're told.

[Read our article Coaching and Training 5S](#)

DO MORE
WITH LESS



A way of doing more, better and with less

There's a problem with the way Lean is sold though, and it's a challenge I've had from participants several times recently when delivering Lean Awareness training for a large construction company.

We have a slide at the beginning which describes Lean as "A way of doing more, better with less; less human effort, less equipment, less materials, less time and less space".

This is text book stuff, at its most basic level those are exactly the kind of objectives people are trying to achieve when implementing Lean.

I then go on to talk about how change will only ever be sustained with the buy-in of the people, and someone inevitably interjects saying "hang on, you just said the purpose is to have less human effort, it must be quite hard to get people's buy-in when you've already implied you're aiming to make some of them redundant". Hmmm, good challenge. At least it shows they're paying attention.

Here is a contradiction at the heart of Lean

When we say less human effort, we don't usually mean less people over all, but it is a very sensitive, nuanced message, and if delivered too bluntly it's possible to put people off altogether. Not ideal when Lean depends of those very same people actually wanting to get involved.

The first thing I mention by way of reassurance is that I can genuinely say that throughout my 13 years of working in improvement-based roles I have never worked on a project with the specific objective of making people redundant.

Your business will stand still

When we advance from Lean Awareness to Lean Advocate training we start to talk about Continuous Improvement as a cycle – you work according to operating procedures, measure the performance, display what's measured, meet with the team to review the display, identify root causes of issues, solve the issues, update the operating procedures and then start again. If everyone sees that the improvement involved people leaving the organisation against their will then it will be incredibly difficult to engage them in the next cycle.

If it's perceived that Lean is directly associated with redundancy, then your organisation no longer has an effective improvement program because no one will have anything to do with it, and your business will standstill.

So how does this square with Lean's aim of achieving "less human effort"?

There are two answers to that:

1. While my projects have never caused redundancy, I have worked in areas where people are leaving anyway. One small project that always springs to mind was in a team of five credit controllers, two of whom were planning to retire within a year. The team had never done any structured improvement work before, and by identifying and removing waste in their processes and focussing their efforts on the value-added activity we managed to replace the two leavers with one part time new starter. Without overloading, the team of five people had become 3½. Moreover, they had a renewed sense of purpose because they knew that their activity was more concentrated on delivering benefit for the business.

2. An answer that really resonates with project managers and designers in the construction industry, is that using less human effort on the processes which they don't like (typically the processes that are not directly customer facing, such as time sheet submission) will allow them more time to focus on the things they do like, and which benefit the customer. I've worked with designers in various industries, and there is often a fear that Lean will act as a constrainer, that standardisation will result in less room for creativity. When I explain the '[8 wastes](#)' to them though they can always identify examples within the admin processes they don't like doing. If we consider the time they spend on the creative side of their job as value added activity, it starts to become clear how Lean application to the rest of it will give them more time doing what they went into their careers to do.

If you have a question about this article, or if you're looking for support with a specific situation, feel free to get in touch on 01926 633333 alternatively you can email us at info@bourton.co.uk.

