

There's no blame just learning...

There are no truer words when it comes to understanding the concept of knowledge transfer in the construction environment. Once we start to associate blame to lessons learnt, all knowledge is lost, and individuals will seek to protect their own interests.

Transferring knowledge from one project to another

Knowledge transfer refers to sharing or disseminating of knowledge and providing inputs to problem solving.

Knowledge transfer is the structured approach to transferring knowledge from one part of the organisation to another or from one project to another.

Like knowledge management, knowledge transfer seeks to organise, create, capture or distribute knowledge and ensure its availability for future users.

Don't wait for a project to end before sharing knowledge

In construction organisations, there are complex and dynamic interactions between clients, contractors and sub-contractors often with intense time pressures, such as, last-minute design clashes, material and product lead times, operational legalities, safety considerations, red-tape, and the list goes on...

Often knowledge transfer is retrospective; an exercise that happens at the end of a project, called Lessons Learnt. The knowledge gathered by the team can get diluted though, as the team disbands and joins other projects as individuals.

The Proof of Concept approach

I recently had the privilege of working with a project team on a major infrastructure project, with the aim to develop a 'Proof of Concept' approach to identify and evidence the potential value of knowledge and learning transfer in order to gain a better understanding of potential benefits associated with effective knowledge sharing.



Below are some of the highlights:

It's important to capture the scenarios and outcomes as you go, as information can get lost in translation or lost due to selective memory when not captured in real-time.

We discovered actions are often taken to resolve only one of the many causes of an issue, which can lead to the perception of knowledge transfer failure. This is because there is a high level of interaction between multiple knowledge scenarios and outcomes. We should therefore look at it more systematically and address the multiple causes that can be masked by one overriding issue.

To further understand the benefits from knowledge transfer and in order to quantify the potential benefits, we converted the scenarios into a risk profile and used existing risk modelling to calculate a credible associated project risk value.

By applying Knowledge Transfer Mitigation Measures we drastically changed the risk profile. This leads to the conclusion that instigating knowledge transfer early in a project will drastically reduce the likelihood of problems occurring and therefore reduce the project risk profile.

Conclusion

Lessons learnt, and knowledge share cannot be a one-off exercise, it needs to be imbedded into the culture and processes of a business, with a continual improvement loop fed by every project.

We should continually challenge and refresh learning and knowledge transfer as business activities adapt and modify to suit the ever-changing business environments.

As far as employee relations is concerned, it has always been very clear to me that any proposed changes will not work unless the employees are bought into them.

If people are not happy with the new way of working then the project has failed, because once the facilitator moves on, the employees will go back to working how they always did before. However good your Control Plan is, if people simply refuse to do what's being asked of them then your improvement will not be sustained.

Of course, that situation can be avoided by ensuring that the employees are involved in designing the change in the first place. If they accept the need for change, recognise a benefit not just to the company but also to themselves, and are confident in and comfortable with what they're being asked to do, they will not be a barrier. If not, the project is likely to fail.

Maybe I must face a new reality though. Every organisation I have ever worked in has relied upon teamwork, collaboration, and a collective desire to get the job done well. In those circumstances, people might be sceptical of improvement programs aiming to increase efficiency, but they can be won over when they see that everyone will benefit. There is a type of place where I've never worked though, work places where a relentless drive for efficiency has seen employees pushed to their physical or mental limits without regard for their wellbeing, and where high staff turnover is considered the norm. These are work environments where efficiency drives have been pushed way beyond what would be acceptable to the workforce, but they are given no choice other than to leave. Is this an example of Lean Six Sigma being pushed too far?

The answer is definitely no! In fact, this is not Lean Six Sigma at all. Even people who've attended a one-day Lean Awareness course can tell you that Lean has the well-being of people at its heart. In DMAIC, measurement of the process is essential, measurement of the people is not even recommended. In Six Sigma terminology, people and their individual characteristics may be one of the observed Xs (inputs) which cause variability in your Y measure (the output), but the data will almost always point towards other factors which can be changed to achieve your desired outcome. Or, to quote 20th Century Lean pioneer W. Edwards Deming, "eighty-five percent of the reasons for failure are deficiencies in systems and processes rather than the employee. The role of Management is to change the process rather than badgering employees to do better".

The challenge for modern Lean facilitators, as highlighted both by my Uncle and by the program on Radio 4, is the image of tools like KPIs. We know the theory that an organisation needs clear goals in terms of what it wants to achieve, and that one way to make this happen is to align employees' targets with those of the organisation. What we have to recognise now is that we might be dealing with employees who have experience of the language of targets and KPIs being deployed in an environment which doesn't like Lean Six Sigma.

The lady from the bank who was criticised for only being Very Good pointed out that at least one person in every branch had to be considered "Under Performing". It is obvious that statistically someone in an office will be the lowest performer, but it is also entirely possible that that person's performance is perfectly good enough, it just happens to be marginally lower than everyone else's. Forcing local managers to implement a target driven system which labels at least one person as Under-Performing, and attaching salary related consequences to that label, is statistically absurd, and leaves people no longer working as a team, but competing against each other.

Conclusion

The notion that productivity improvements can be achieved through implementation of a system which turns employees against each other and disciplines people for acceptable performance is not something which Lean should be in any way associated with, but there are increasingly likely to be people in the workforce who will make that link. Successfully implementing change within an organisation has nearly always been about the way it is communicated. It seems in modern times, when we must counter this efficiency-at-all-costs narrative, this is becoming more crucial than ever.

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.