

Cheerleader or Lean Leader?

Encouragement without lean competence makes for a leader unworthy of trust.

By Lonnie Wilson

My firm spends a lot of time working with clients who are struggling, or have struggled, to successfully implement lean initiatives. We have found common denominators that cause these culture-changing events to fail, and the failing that raises its ugly head way too often is inadequate leadership. One aspect of leadership inadequacy that is hardly ever spoken of is the trustworthy nature -- or lack thereof -- of management and leadership.

Leadership that is untrustworthy? It is not often spoken of, but trust is a foundational issue in any relationship, and the relationship of a lean leader to his/her subordinates and peers is no exception. In fact, the very nature of a lean initiative puts more pressure on this issue of trust than in most business interactions. If you do not have leaders who are trustworthy, then your lean initiative is likely to fail.

What is Trust?

Many people hear trustworthiness and think of honesty, moral values and not much else. But if leadership has these values, is that enough? Enough to adequately lead a lean transformation? I think not.

Trust is the cement that binds relationships. It applies at home, and it applies at work. And there is one time that trust is really, really important -- and that is anytime you jointly venture into the unknown.

That is why a strong relationship based on trust is so important in a lean implementation. Lean is all about change, and change is all about venturing into the unknown. The unknown is uncomfortable for all of us -- frequently so uncomfortable that it causes us to freeze. This discomfort makes it seemingly impossible to summon the courage to venture into the unknown. Frequently we are more willing to accept a known bad situation than attempt to solve a situation with some risk attached to it.

For those who are entrusted to lead our subordinates, I have one question: As a leader, can you provide the guidance, the assistance and the support necessary so these change agents are willing to act in the face of these risks?

To answer that question, let's take a look at the anatomy of trust and see what it takes to be trusted to supply the guidance, the assistance and the support your change agents need.

The Anatomy of Trust

We don't just trust, rather we "trust to." For example, my neighbor is an honest gentleman whom I would "trust to" watch my most prized possessions: my family. I would "trust him to" watch my kids and grandkids as they swim in the pool. However, if my water heater failed, I would not "trust him to" repair it. He does not know an end wrench from a pair of water pump pliers.

To be trustworthy you must not only have key values such as honesty but you also must be competent in the area of concern. Would you let an honest, yet incompetent physician perform surgery on you? Would you hire an honest but incompetent CPA to do your taxes? Of course not.

Lean Competence Required

If you are dishonest, you simply cannot be trusted. I find few folks who are really dishonest. But I do find some who put significant obstacles in their paths that prevent them from acting in the best interests of the employees, the stockholders and the customers. Instead, narrow self interests, such as a bonus or a possible promotion, cloud management's judgment. Regarding this self-interest versus company interest, my advice is to be introspective and honest. Ask yourself if you are doing this for yourself or for the company and your customers. Then take the high road.

Let's say you are honest and have a healthy skill set at keeping the interests of the employees, stockholders and customers in proper focus. Given that, can you as the boss be trusted to supply the guidance, assistance and support from your perch of leadership? This drills down to a simple question: Are you "lean competent?"

Let's look at a not-too-fictional scenario or two.

You are the engineering director for a large manufacturing firm, with several first-line supervisors who report to you. One is in charge of a group of engineers whose task it is to support the lean implementation. Your supervisor approaches you with a proposal to change the age-old practice of producing large lots to producing small lots with more frequent changeovers. You and your supervisor discuss the idea and decide not only is it part of your lean implementation but also it is the right time to implement this lean concept. To assist the team, you do a little brush clearing at the next level.

However, as the supervisor proceeds with the implementation, he gets push back from the maintenance and production folks. This "batch-busting" philosophy of small lot production is clearly in harmony with the plant's lean implementation and both maintenance and production personnel agree with the principles -- until they have to change. Then the real culture-changing work begins.

The team in charge of this change is at a crossroads. If they need support from you, can you intercede appropriately and support your team? I have seen this played out dozens of times, and it only goes well if you know your stuff. Simply put, you must be "lean competent."

By "lean competent," in this case I mean you know the benefits of small lot production, you can articulate and demonstrate how it is done, and you can positively relate it to both the lean implementation strategy your facility has orally committed to and the current business condition of your facility. If you are not lean competent, your team likely loses this argument and your lean implementation loses steam.

Say you are "lean competent" enough to convince the maintenance and production managers and things proceed smoothly for a while. Soon your plant will need to supply incoming materials in smaller lots, more frequently, to further mature your lean system. However, when your team

discusses this with the logistics manager he balks completely. He cites the need for a new \$60,000 forklift and two additional materials handlers per shift to accommodate the more frequent deliveries.

You and your team are pretty sure he has not thought it through well enough. However, in the face of shrinking capital budgets and downward pressure on costs, adding facilities and adding manpower are formidable enemies to the lean implementation. Will you succumb to the pressures of budgets and manpower costs? Or will you summon the courage to push the lean implementation forward?

Do you have the skills and the understanding of lean to stand up and argue, “Our stated objective is to reach the ideal state of small lot production and that means small lots in the warehouse as well. It is part of our vision, it is clearly stated in our ‘House of Lean,’ and we have all received the training that describes the benefits. We all know there will be obstacles along the way. We cannot allow these obstacles to prevent us from trying to attain our ideal state. Now, how can we assist you as we try to overcome these obstacles?”

That statement requires a deep and abiding understanding of lean, and a good dose of courage and character. That statement came from someone who can be trusted to guide, assist and support his organization as it embarks on this journey into the unknown.

Why Lean Competent?

You must be lean competent to guide and assist your subordinates as they pursue a practical “next step” in taking the entire organization through the PDCA cycle. You must be lean competent so your guidance and assistance allows those affected to “see” the next steps as you proceed toward the ideal state. You must be lean competent so these steps are large enough to be useful and challenging, yet small enough to be attainable in a reasonable time frame.

As you proceed into the action steps, you must be lean competent so you can provide the “attaboys” when they are appropriate and yet intervene and support when push back comes.

The Importance of “Knowing Your Stuff”

A wide range of personal values and traits are required of lean leaders. Among those are courage and character along with good listening skills and large doses both of curiosity and humility. In practice I have found that a large fraction of lean leaders, particularly top-level lean leaders, have a good complement of the personal values and traits required. However, too many do not want to learn the basics of their own production system. They simply do not want to delve into the technical details -- the very technical details that make their production system work. Consequently, the facility does not have lean competency at the top levels, which causes their subordinates to hesitate before they act. It causes subordinates to be risk-averse, and it also causes subordinates to not trust their leadership and their management. With this cultural paradigm, progress is a long way off.

Presuming you have a strong set of shared values and the courage and character it takes, you can support your team. But, quite frankly, that means your subordinates can only “trust you to be” a high-

priced lean-cheerleader. With only half the formula for trust in place, you don't yet cut the mustard to be a lean leader. These are necessary but not yet sufficient traits to become a lean leader.

However, if you have those strong personal traits and are also lean competent, your subordinates now can count on you not only to supply the support but also to supply the guidance and assistance that they will need to succeed. Then they can trust you to be a lean leader.

Only then will the team be "en-couraged" to walk metaphorically half-naked into the wilderness of the unknown as they aggressively pursue changes that are both risky and necessary to make your business a better money-making machine and a more secure work place.

Ask yourself: Have I developed and demonstrated the personal traits and lean competency required to become the lean leader my company needs?

Lonnie Wilson has been teaching and implementing lean and other culture-changing techniques for more than 40 years. His book, "How To Implement Lean Manufacturing" was released in August 2009. His new book on "How to Lead and Manage a Lean Facility" is under construction and will go to print in the third quarter of 2011. Wilson is a frequent speaker at conferences and seminars. In addition to IndustryWeek, he has published articles in Quality Digest and is a frequent contributor to iSixSigma magazine. His manufacturing experience spans 20 years with Chevron, where he held a number of management positions. In 1990 he founded Quality Consultants, www.qc-ep.com, which teaches and applies lean and other culture-changing techniques to small entrepreneurs and Fortune 500 firms, principally in the United States, Mexico and Canada. In particular, he specializes in "lean revitalizations," assisting firms that have failed or failing lean implementations and want to "do it right." In his not-so-spare time, Wilson is the men's varsity soccer coach at Cathedral High School in El Paso, Texas. You can e-mail Lonnie Wilson at law@qc-ep.com.