

The “*way we work*” – A Continuous Improvement challenge

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“We believe that through the adoption of a continuous improvement and learning ethos and through the application of Lean Six Sigma methodologies organisations’ can achieve world class quality, service and cost control thus sustaining a leading position in their chosen marketplace.”

INTRODUCTION

In today's business environment practices such as Lean and Six Sigma are seeming to become the dogma of organisations’ in much the same way as the quality management principles of the 80’s, and the ISO standards of the 90’s, were brandished about.

Yet again it appears we are poised to make the mistakes of the past in that we will fail to adequately understand and embrace the true benefits of Lean Six Sigma as a continuous improvement methodology. Principles that allow us to “focus upon eliminating waste and reducing variation in processes”, sound familiar?

AN 80’S PERSPECTIVE

In the mid 80’s management were indoctrinated in what was to become an avalanche of quality management principles and practices. Firstly there was Edward Demingⁱ, then Crosbyⁱⁱ Quality Management, followed by quality management systems and statistical process control. Furthermore there were the 7 Basic Tools of TQCⁱⁱⁱ and of course let us not forget the Seven New Planning & Management Tools^{iv}.

Many organisations at this time, seemingly obsessed with this introduction of quality management, were at the same time retrenching

thousands of employees worldwide in an effort to achieve their targets. Organisations were spending enormous amounts of money trying to find the secret to good production and manufacturing practices and yet they failed, in our view, because they did not heed the learning’s of what they were advocating.

Lessons about reducing costs through continuous improvement practices as opposed to downsizing, rightsizing or reengineering of the workforces it employed were simply ignored. Frighteningly at the time, many colleagues in other organisations were faced with much of the same. On one hand we were being taught that these philosophies were the saviour of our organisation and that each and every one of us must embrace them to survive, yet what we witnessed was anything but that reality it seemed!

To this day much of what Deming and others espoused failed because followers of quality management at that time became zealots instead of champions. One approach creates distrust and dissatisfaction whilst the other creates an environment of ownership, empowerment and most of all opportunities for individual growth.

A 2006 PERSPECTIVE

Roll forward 15 or so years and we now see the push to embrace Lean Six Sigma Methodologies. So what is Lean Six Sigma? Well Lean Manufacturing was pioneered by Toyota^v and in simple terms focuses upon the reduction of non-value added activities which enable the reduction of cycle times. Six Sigma on the other hand was developed by Motorola^{vi} and made famous by General Electric and focuses upon the reduction of variability in any given process. Whilst Six Sigma as a methodology is much more than simply statistical measurement, when combined with Lean they become a powerful weapon in the battle to gain sustainable continuous improvement outcomes in processes.

Today we see efforts to embrace Lean Six Sigma gaining momentum and yet many appear to have embraced the Lean component alone. There appears little or no regard neither for understanding and utilising the benefits of Six Sigma nor for that matter of using them simultaneously in any continuous improvement approach. Conducting a Kaizen Blitz and implementing 5S practices, without using Value Stream Mapping as the roadmap to determine what actually needs to change seems to be foolhardy at best.

Our experiences show that this unfortunately is a common practice with many of today's managers. One wonders whether we are not once again taking the approach of change for change sake, brandished under the umbrella of a Kaizen Blitz and 5S! Transformation of a process area, utilisation of brainstorming practices and employee involvement all sounds well

and good but are these improvements proving to be sustainable?

How many companies have spent considerable time, effort and money with the implementation of Kaizen Blitz events, followed by much fanfare and initial success, only to find months later that the changes have fallen into a new state of chaos? Rather than learning from the past we suggest that many of today's managers, instead of using Lean Six Sigma Methodologies in a systematic and holistic approach to process improvement, have taken to picking the "eye teeth" from the methodologies.

In short it is our experience that some appear focused upon using only those components that bring immediate gratification. The approach is one of seeking immediate and instant change, to be seen by other as doing something proactive.

THE CHALLENGE

This apparent misuse of Lean Manufacturing, being seen by many as simply a never ending series of Kaizen and 5S events, will eventually prove to be counter productive and again the risk is that Lean Six Sigma will become seen as simply another fad. The failure to fully embrace the need for accurate and focused statistical measurement and analysis supported by DMAIC, VSM, and DOE methodologies means that many are implementing changes within the workplace in an adhoc fashion without understanding the implications impacting the entire process.

For many this will be a familiar theme to that which managers in the 80 have faced. The truth is that Deming

emphasised the need for statistical process control as well as his 14 Point Management Plan^{vii} yet all too often we only focused upon the people involvement components of TQM.

Today we once again find that the focus appears drawn towards Lean Manufacturing alone, and then only to the components that bring immediate results. The failure to undertake change from a holistic perspective, that is, to link changes to your customer's needs and that of the overall organisation could

eventually prove to be very risky indeed. If we fail to understand and combine the Six Sigma components into our Lean Programs then we will once again fail, as we did before! We need to combine Lean and Six Sigma methodologies in such a way that they become a way of life not a fad.

Furthermore Lean Six Sigma, when applied correctly, should and can become the language of the business, "*The way we work*".

References:

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- ⁱ W. Edward Deming, "*Out of the Crisis*", MIT Press
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 - ^{iv} Nancy R. Tague, "*The Quality Toolbox*", ASQ Quality Press
 - ^v Taiichi Ohno, "*Toyota Production System: Beyond Large-Scale Production*", Productivity Press
 - ^{vi} Paul Keller, "*Six Sigma Demystified*", McGraw-Hill
 - ^{vii} W. Edward Deming, "*Out of the Crisis*", MIT Press