Developing a Foundation for Lean Implementation

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What separates a deeply rooted lean organization from one that is lean on the surface only?

I have visited many manufacturing companies that claim to be implementing lean; the best of them truly have embraced most or all elements of lean, particularly those related to the people side of the equation. What seems to be lacking in most unsuccessful lean implementations are what I believe to be the key elements of a foundation for lean: total employee involvement and management commitment. One manufacturing executive told me he expected lean implementation to be 50% technical and 50% people, but the reality for him was 95% people and only 5% technical. **That's right; the most important element in implementing lean is people.**

First of all, executive management must be committed to lean. If lean is a "grass roots" effort, it will have limited success. This is because lean involves so much of the organization. It involves procurement, manufacturing, quality, sales, marketing, and human resources. Each of these organizations will need to participate in the transformation. Therefore, the executives must want it. They must believe that it will improve their bottom line. If they don't, it will fail.

After management has committed to implementing lean, the next step in forming a foundation for lean is communicating this commitment to the entire organization. This often missing but critical step conveys the importance of the program to the employees. Company newsletters, e-mail, the intranet, and any other such tools should be used, but the most important means of communication is having a company executive directly address the employees. The executive should explain what lean is, why the company is going to implement it, and what the next steps will be.

After the employees have been informed that this program is real and that the company is committed, the organization should begin scouting for team leaders. These are often the people that voluntarily seek to get involved in the program; the team leaders will help to train the rest of the organization. The organization should then find a change agent, often an external (or in some cases internal) consultant that can "train the trainers" and work collaboratively with management to move the program forward.

The final step in forming the foundation for lean is planning a reward system. One common factor in successful lean organizations is a reward system for employees. The system must reward employees for suggesting and implementing useful ideas that eliminate waste in the organization, and the system must reward employees for sustaining lean throughout the organization.

After taking these steps, an organization has an increased likelihood of initial and sustained success as a lean enterprise. Lean is not something that an industrial or manufacturing engineering group does to an organization; it is a cultural change. The importance of developing a foundation for this cultural change is critical to the success of any organization that begins a lean journey.