

Does Lean Work in Any Industry?

Darren Dolcemascolo

There is much debate in both electronic and print media regarding the applicability of lean. Some maintain that lean is only applicable to "old-school" industries that aren't innovative. Others say that lean is for high-volume production only. Still others maintain that lean can be applied to manufacturing processes in any industry but not to things like product development because lean stunts creativity. To answer these questions thoughtfully, we must examine what lean really means. What is this concept we now call lean?

Lean was originally a term that the authors of *The Machine that Changed the World* (Womack, Jones, and Roos) used to describe the Toyota methodology of designing and manufacturing automobiles. **Lean thinking, according to Womack and Jones, is the antidote to waste. "It provides a way to specify value, line up value-creating actions in the best sequence, conduct these activities without interruption whenever someone requests them, and perform them more and more effectively."** By eliminating waste from their processes, Toyota has been able to design automobiles that are easier and less expensive to manufacture with better quality and faster time-to-market than their competition.

The success that Toyota has enjoyed cannot be duplicated by simply implementing the same tools Toyota employs. **The "trick" is figuring out what specifically lean means for any given organization and determining what other characteristics are necessary to make lean successful.** Any organization that begins a lean transformation must first understand its customers and its value streams. Only after doing this can it begin to understand and eliminate waste. **The most important factor is committed, lean-thinking leadership.**

If we accept that lean is all about eliminating waste and providing value to the customer, then lean thinking can work for any manufacturer or any service provider.