

# 3 Unsuccessful Tries at Implementing Change— What's Wrong?

*By Patrick Karbon*

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## Question:

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I've been working as a mid-level manager in a Fortune 500 manufacturing firm for almost 30 years now. During this time, we've made several serious attempts to imbed the practices of lean & six sigma in our operations. Part of the 'launch' efforts included extensive training for the hourly workforce in lean principles, along with one day refreshers on diversity and team-building. Participants in the training can be overheard to say things like "I'm experiencing déjà vu - isn't this the same PowerPoint® slide we saw three years ago when we went through this training?" The real problem is, after three launches, we seem to be only slightly further along in our 'lean' mindset than we were 15 years ago and the competition is widening the gap by progressing steadily along the path. What are we doing wrong?

## Answer:

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With 30 years experience in the manufacturing industry, you are certainly no stranger to change. From the way you describe the situation, your organization is suffering the consequences of a common approach to change - train the troops in the technical aspects of the 'new way,' allow a reasonable time for implementation of the lessons learned, then retrain the troops in areas yet unimproved.

I am familiar with the struggles associated with large scale organizational change, and very close to the particular change you write about - lean manufacturing. The fact that you are now in the midst of a third round of training in an attempt to implement lean and six sigma in a large manufacturing operation suggests to me that your organization:

- a) has yet to identify the obstacles preventing a legitimate improvement effort from taking root, or
- b) is unable to overcome them, or
- c) is unwilling to invest the effort to make changes at the top of the house that will enable lasting change.

The good news is, the methods for identifying the obstacles and paving the way for effective implementation of an organization-wide change effort such as lean and six sigma have been identified and distributed long ago. One source you might reference for guidance is Dr. E.W. Deming's 14 points, focusing specifically on #7: Institute leadership focused on helping people, machines, and gadgets to do a better job. This, like many concepts in business, is easy to understand but hard to do, especially as we are relying on top leaders and high-level managers to take on new behaviors and abandon practices that have, in their view(s), brought them success in the past. Deming, not unlike others who favored a disciplined, focused approach to developing a quality organization, recognized the need for management to lead the charge - and model the desired behavior - toward creation of the new environment.

The disappointing news is, companies have ignored these methods, in spite of evidence that they work well in competitor's operations, in an effort to meet short-term goals that, in some instances, compromise long-term success. If you are working in the US domestic auto industry or work to supply them with parts, this lesson is all too clear to you. If you are engaged in another segment of manufacturing, you would do well to pay close attention to what has happened to the 'Big 3' over the past 30 years as a result of focusing priorities on what looked good in the near-term without consideration for the impact on the entire organizational system. It sounds like you have been exposed - several times - to a rigorous training program that

probably covered important topics like standardized work, visual management, robust, capable, in-control processes, waste elimination, problem solving, and others. Your company may also have communicated the message of intent to achieve lean in all areas of the manufacturing operation through widespread distribution of coffee cups, caps, and shirts carrying the new logo. But the picture you paint does not resemble an integrated effort to develop leadership skills along with technical skills; or a systems approach to aligning strategic and tactical activities. Your organization's repeated attempts to implement lean processes throughout the manufacturing operations may suffer from many factors other than short-term thinking on the part of leadership, but this area is one that should provide lasting results and ensure that workers aren't completing the same training courses every few years - unless the courses are truly needed to remedy a deficiency in skills or knowledge.

Ensuring an appropriate environment exists to support the new ways of doing business is a leadership responsibility. Deploying skilled, knowledgeable workers to implement new (lean) processes in an organizational culture that doesn't support them would be viewed by most prudent leaders as an exercise in futility. Most of us would consider it unrealistic to expect an organization that is experiencing difficulty executing on its current mission to successfully execute on a new, system-wide endeavor that touches, when done properly, virtually every aspect of organizational life; but this view is probably not clear - or accurately portrayed - to the leadership in your company.

What you should consider focusing attention on are ways to fundamentally refine the way that all leaders and members of the management ranks conduct business in order to raise the level of lean awareness and convey the message that lean is here to stay. It may help to remind your leadership of the success Toyota achieved by applying lessons borrowed from Ford Motor Company's early production practices. Although the term 'lean' hadn't been invented at the time, the success Toyota earned by instituting leadership with the aim of consistently 'helping people and machines and gadgets to do a better job' is impossible to ignore. And this focus on leadership is the key, in my opinion, that may be missing in a Fortune 500 manufacturing firm that is now on its third round of training on the technical side of lean.

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Linkage is a global organizational development company that specializes in leadership development. We provide clients around the globe with integrated solutions that include strategic consulting services, customized leadership development and training experiences, tailored assessment services, and benchmark research. Linkage's mission is to connect high-performing leaders and organizations to the futures they want to create.

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