



The Optimist

The Pessimist

The Lean Thinker

## Mitigating the pitfalls of lean training

In the previous article, I clarified on some of the common misunderstandings about Lean. Lean extends well beyond manufacturing and is now prevalent in healthcare, F&B, Retail, Outsourcing and other service sectors. The size of the enterprise has no direct bearing on Lean applicability. It is a highly economical optimization management philosophy and leads to better workforce motivation, lower operational cost, and shorter lead time for better customer satisfaction.

There are companies that have a good appreciation of Lean, yet are apprehensive to embark upon the Lean training.

### “We are not ready for change”

There is truth in that definitely, as they could be potentially constrained by resources or more urgent business challenges facing the company. Nevertheless, no one is usually ready or willing to embrace “change” as it is human tendency to stick to old habits and remain business-as-usual. However, it is better to embark upon change than let it being forced upon you by market forces.

### “Our situation is different. It’s a different mindset here.”

There is always a concern that the rigor of Japanese discipline (for Lean) may be hard to emulate in other culture or company. History proved otherwise. When Lean was introduced back in 1984 in North America, General Motor (GM) put it to the most demanding of tests. They piloted it in one of their worst plant in term of quality amid a heavily unionized workforce (United Automobile Worker, UAW, labor Union) with the typical free-wheeling spirit of the American. By the summer of 1985, it was a transformed place with

great success in product quality, throughput and workers’ motivation.

### “We have tried Lean training but failed to implement it at the workplace”

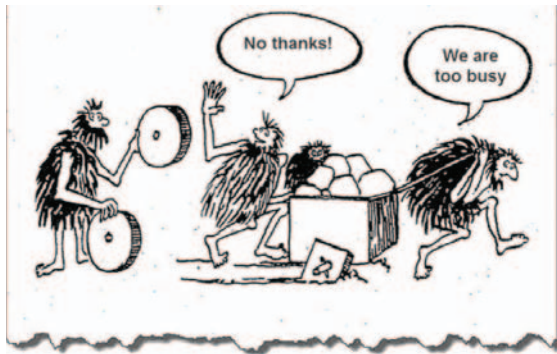
This topic abounds with academia literature on why Lean transformation failed. I would like to approach it from a different perspective, a trainer perspective, and share on how to mitigate those pitfalls.

#### • Who attended the Lean training? Who is the intended Lean Champion?

Some companies send their senior management for Lean training. However, business leaders’ main focus is on managing the company, therefore leaving very little opportunity to drive any Lean transformation. If a junior employee was sent for the training, he/she could face resistance from his superior when he champions the transformation. A better proposal will be for the management to be paired up with operational staff to act as Lean Champions. They should also be the owner of the area where they want to champion the change. The Lean Champion needs to have direct control to the areas for improvement. They should be progressive looking and attend Lean training voluntarily, and not in order to fulfil certain training requirements.

#### • What type of training did they sign up for?

The most common type of training is classroom training. The disadvantage for this is that when the employee returns to the workplace, they face challenges when implementing what they have learnt in theory into their actual work. This is because the translation of



theoretical knowledge into practical implementation is not that straightforward. Furthermore, if the knowledge is not used, it will not take long for it to be forgotten.

If an external consultant led the Lean transformation, there is a good possibility when he is off the scene, the Lean transformation might come to a standstill as there is no local expertise groomed to continue the journey. However, it would be counter-intuitive for the consultant to develop in-house expertise.

#### • After training programme support

Unfortunately, most training programmes end once the training is completed. This also includes programmes involving on-site project work. There is a lack of follow up consultation, which then usually kills off any budding Lean initiatives in the company. Should the newly minted Lean champions run into difficulties, and with no one to turn to, inaction will lead to a slow demise.

#### • Is the ground receptive? Is the senior management aligned?

On-site project work presents a good opportunity to align the senior business leaders and gain traction with the operational level on Lean transformation. It is an excellent window to engage the company holistically and enterprise-wide. In this way, Lean champions will find a more receptive audience when they are back at the workplace to lead the transformation. Both management support and operational level buy-in are vital to start and sustain the Lean transformation.

#### • Who actually reaps the benefits?

Can the staff enjoy the fruits of the improvement? Who are the beneficiaries, should the ideas work? Too often, we have seen that efforts to improve productivity and efficiency conversely leads to a bigger workload on the employees. If the benefits are only enjoyed by the customers and the company in terms of profit, how can Lean gain any traction? The best opportunity to get buy-in from the employees is for them to share in the fruits of their success. Incorporate their ideas in order to improve their daily tasks. This will encourage further contribution and sustain the kaizen ( ) momentum.

#### • Anchor the Lean movement into corporate events to ensure continuity

Last but not least, even with management support and employees' buy-in, it is also important to anchor the Lean movement in the company events' calendar. For instance, publicizing the Lean results in the internal newsletter, individual sharings during corporate retreats, or even presenting awards related to Lean/kaizen at the annual D&D. This improves the visibility and maintains the rhythm of the Lean movement.

The above list is non-exhaustive, but serves as a good starting guide to companies embarking on the Lean training. The LSDP (Lean Skills Development Programme) by Lean Transformation and Innovation Centre (LTIC) based in Singapore Institute of Technology is developed to mitigate all these pitfalls. The Lean training programme strengthens the nexus of skill acquisition and actual utilization at the workplace. There are options in-built into the programme itself (at no further cost) to ensure continuity of the Lean journey. On-site coaching approach helps to develop in-house capability for a sustainable Lean transformation. For further information, you may refer to our website <https://www.singaporetech.edu.sg/lean-transformation-innovation-centre> or email [Lean@SingaporeTech.edu.sg](mailto:Lean@SingaporeTech.edu.sg). ■

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Mark is based in Singapore Institute of Technology, LTIC (Lean Transformation and Innovation Center). The center aims to promote and develop lean practices among local enterprises and drive adoption of lean thinking, culture and mindset through the partnership with LEI (Lean Enterprise Institute). Prior to joining LTIC, Mark was a lean six sigma (black belt) practitioner with the private sector for more than 10 years.