



The success of companies that choose to undergo a lean transformation is catalyzed by passionate leadership and the resulting culture change that serves as the backbone of the journey. A lean leader creates the requisite excitement for a profitable growth across the entire enterprise enabling the proper transformation to take place. For “lean” to work effectively, leadership must establish the overriding business vision and then communicate it constantly to everyone. In addition, leadership must avoid making the transformation too easy by setting stretch goals that are radical and uncomfortable. Failing to do so sets everyone up for underperformance. It’s better to overreach, fail, and learn from the failure because taking the kinder, gentler road will stifle creativity.

Standard Work

One implementation tool—standard work—is a hallmark of a lean company. One element of leadership’s standard work is to communicate continuously—the good, the bad, and the ugly. Another element is to show the vigilance to monitor progress on a regular basis while embedding countermeasures to handle anomalies. Involvement must be both personal and visible to be effective.

Another part of the lean leader’s tool kit is policy deployment. It’s a structured way to execute to achieve the vision by selecting few vital, critical, quantifiable objectives that you must focus on to drive change. You must

then commit to establishing metrics with which you will track progress, and create incentives to help everyone get there.

Cultural Shift

Lean leaders must nurture a lean culture, and it’s hard to drive such a culture change without creating a critical mass of believers. One way to make the nurturing viral is to develop lean leaders—zealots—within the organization. Zealots are the catalysts who will drive organizational change and growth. Zealots will take your visions and help infect everyone else with the lean “bug.” Zealots can exist anywhere within the organization, so don’t limit your recruitment to titled managers when seeking them out. Zealots are willing to step outside their comfort zone, seek disruptive ideas, and look for breakthrough opportunities. They are tenacious optimists and they are your best assets for helping to drive cultural change.

With an enthusiastic leadership team in place as the catalyst for change, your first lean steps must be “narrow and deep.” This will allow you to show the true power of the process. The goal of going narrow and deep is to create change quickly and demonstrate the power of transformation by visible examples. If you’re interested in true culture change across the entire organization, you need to start with small and deep successes or you’ll never create enthusiasm. Over time you can expand on the success to bring change to the rest of the organization. This is where policy deployment can be most useful: it helps you focus. The results from those initial projects can then be communicated across the company and the enthusiasm that is engendered can then be used to build on that highly visible success.

Win–Win

Using this roadmap, lean leaders can inspire change, help create breakthroughs, jump-start the process, and mobilize and

empower everyone to make improvements. It’s a team effort with the ultimate goal of making it work for the benefit of all. When committed leadership at all levels of the organization can sustain a blameless environment where creativity and risk-taking are encouraged, then the culture change that creates competitive advantage will always come naturally.

This issue’s articles touch on many aspects of culture change and competitive advantage, starting with our feature from Vermeer Manufacturing Corporation on changing the dynamics of your business through a market-based growth strategy (p. 2). Part of developing a lean culture means becoming a learning organization and the characteristics of such an organization are described in an article by Joe Panebianco (p. 6). Negative behaviors can work to the detriment of an organization’s lean journey. Learn how to deal with “bad actors” in “Combating Anti-Synergy” (p. 8) and how your leadership style can affect your business in “The Art of Consistency” (p. 11). For a more practical application to your lean journey, you can also learn about Progressive 5S (p. 12).

I hope that some of these articles will help you to be better leaders in nurturing culture change within your own organizations. ■

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