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Lean: Not Just a Better Toolbox

Jidoka, kaizen, andon, kanban, SMED, visual factory, 5S, 5 Whys. We could fill up this page and more with lists of lean tools. Is it the size of our lean toolbox that really counts? Hardly. It isn't even the quality of the tools that makes a real difference.

What's really behind companies that succeed at sustained lean implementation—and those that don't—is the level of thinking driven by lean rules and principles. How we think determines our behaviors, and no tool can fix faulty thinking.

For example, ask yourself what is the purpose of 5S? If you said "to keep things clean and neat," then you have a good example of how a tool can be misused without the right thought process. If 5S is implemented throughout a factory to clean it up, without applying the principle that says we must be able to spot problems instantly, then it becomes nothing more than a house-keeping exercise and, again, will fail as a sustainable tool. To truly understand 5S, we need to internalize the ability to identify problems immediately, so that we can respond quickly.

To illustrate this point, consider the kanban card. It has been a major tool in many lean transformation efforts since the 1980s. The concept is pretty simple—a downstream process uses parts from an upstream process. As those parts are consumed, a piece of paper or kanban card is removed

and sent back to the upstream process. When a predetermined number of cards accumulates at that upstream process, production may begin to replenish the stock used by the downstream process. Simple—right?

Now we'll look at this simple tool through the lens of lean rules and principles. There are four lean rules (the rules are adapted from the work of Bowen and Spears, "Decoding the DNA of the Toyota Production System," Harvard Business Review, November 1999) that guide improvement and implementation. Rule Two states that we should clearly connect every customer and supplier. This process begins by identifying the customer and the supplier. In this case we'll make it easy, with the upstream process being the supplier, and the downstream process the customer. Now they are clearly connected because the card means only one thing; they know whom it is for and they know why it works. The card is the method, and the only method, by which parts are requested. And it doesn't mean ship "some" parts. It means ship exactly the number of parts on the card—not 8, not 12, but 10. It also means ship immediately, not sometime, but now.

One look at the kanban card in light of the rule at least helps those using it understand why and how it works, because they understand it as a request, not a card. It isn't a piece of paper;

it's a clear customer/supplier connection. More than half the companies I see implementing kanban systems are not successful at getting the users to understand how and why the tool works. And what's the most common excuse? "Our people aren't that smart." They won't say it quite like that, but that's often what is really meant.

You can read about, and understand, the tools of lean in just about any book. You can delegate the application and implementation to just about anyone—engineers, hourly workers, lean facilitators. But you cannot succeed without internalizing the rules and principles of lean throughout all of management, using that thinking to guide not just the implementation, but daily decision making, problem-solving, and managing.

Lean practice and implementation has been around for quite a while now, so why has it taken so long for this to come to light? The simple answer is, "it is hard to see." An addition to that point is, "we didn't know to look."

If you ever take a tour of a Toyota plant you'll easily see 3–5 specific things that you could go back and implement. Because there are so many visible examples, however, we think the difference is in what we see. What we fail to ask is why all those ideas were created in the first place. The answer to this question is where the thinking comes into play. Lean is not about what you see; lean is about how you think.