

Six Simple Steps toward a Lean Management Mindset

-by Jay Watson (Lessons learned from a recent engagement in Oregon...)

The production supervisors and manufacturing managers are off leading Kaizen events and winning gains in productivity and waste reductions, but what about the other members of the site management team? Sometimes overloaded with task lists and daily meetings, how are they getting on the lean thinking bandwagon? Short of a Kaizen event or 5S activity here or there, they may become disinterested in the organization's zeal to become Lean. They may not see an 'improvement connection' within their departmental responsibilities right away. Or conversely, their management style can't wait to do more, even though it's not 'their turn yet'. They may be waiting on the sidelines, feeling left-out.

Drive a continuous improvement mindset within the site leadership team with these ideas:

1. Start every meeting with a Safety tip.

Safety is usually up first within most Lean organizations and thus, Safety is a common denominator with management. Whether you're the engineering manager or production control manager, safety is always on the forefront of leadership imperatives. This single action begins the common tie-in within and between the operation staff members. The manager can bring a tip or suggestion to the session or call on a volunteer in the meeting. Now everyone is on 'readiness alert' for near misses and accident prevention awareness.

2. Status with red/yellow/green 'stop light' charts.

Visual factory techniques are evident on the production floor, but let's bring the idea home to roost in management meetings as well. Institute a color code on the rotating action item list (RAIL). For example, focus on the 'red' items first. Drive those needing immediate attention and follow-up or those initiatives which have gone off-target. 'Yellow' items cite caution may be required. These items need to be addressed or a target may be missed. Green items (complete on task and to target) do not need to be addressed in meetings. This technique works well for NPI items, production meetings, 5-why or root cause analysis investigations – but also can be utilized in HR, Sales strategies, maintenance lists, and even with reviewing status of individual employee objectives.

3. Shorten meeting times.

There is no law that says meetings have to be scheduled for 30 or 60 minutes only. Start setting meetings at random times. For instance, instead of a 30 minute meeting, schedule it for 23 minutes. A 60-minute meeting can be scheduled for 43 minutes. Hold to the schedule, for fun - a kitchen timer may help. Send an agenda out in advance and follow it. Ask for alternate meeting participants if the primary contact is unavailable. (You may find this technique very helpful, especially if you are only addressing the red and yellow color-coded items mentioned above. You may also pick up an additional 15 to 45 minutes a day you can spend out of meetings, depending on your workload...)

4. Status everything, start with a Kaizen (rapid improvement event) calendar.

In an 'operations command center', post a vinyl yearly calendar and lay out Kaizen events every week. Block off the days - whether or not a problem has been identified or Kaizen charter has been developed. You at least have planned on conducting an event (or two) every week. Managers can see when their events are up-coming and now ample time for planning can take place weeks before the scheduled event.

Post up and color-code every important metric to the red/ yellow/ green status overlay concept. Hold daily accountability meetings. Drive red to yellow, Yellow to green.

5. Stand and Deliver.

Write a one-page, and one-page only, weekly report to your manager. Cover accomplishments, successes, and goals that were met. All operating site-level managers should do a weekly report to the General Manager. Each manager should have a weekly work review session with his or her direct report and so on - up the chain of command. This meeting, lasting about 30 minutes, should quickly cover the highlights of accomplishment, but should also focus on hurdles, countermeasures, and upcoming issues in the work week ahead.

At the quarterly reviews, each operations / department manager delivers his or her 'state of the union' address (major accomplishments) in about 20 minutes in front of his or her peers and the general manager. In this one-day off site meeting (held four times a year) – time may be allotted for business ops review and strategic planning activity as well.

6. Special time.

During a 'working lunch', every other week, conduct continuing education sessions with the entire operations management team. Topics, with small-group assignments and outside readings, might cover Lean Management concepts, (I used the book, "Creating a Lean Culture" by David Mann), Change Management (CAP methodologies from GE...), Project Management and other pertinent topics for professional staff development. Facilitate a similar meeting, the other week(s), with the supervisory staff. These team leader lunch n' learn sessions focus more on application (lean tools, problem solving, and project management techniques), than the theory of it all. Facilitate both these sessions the entire year. Continuing improvement means continuing education.

Although not a complete list of ideas and actions, these six simple steps began to change, and indeed challenge the leadership culture of operational excellence. Many leaders began realizing that everyone plays in the C.I. (continuous improvement) swimming pool – not just those within the manufacturing functions. A leadership team walking together toward a lean management mindset, truly believing that 'better is better' and there is no wrong way to improve – but, indeed, a better way to manage.

Jay Watson is a Lean advocate, Management Educator, and managing editor of www.freeleansite.com