Transforming Your Safety Culture With Lean Management

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Many businesses that attempt to use lean techniques in their business often find employees reluctant to embrace changes. However, author Robert Hafey of “Lean Safety, Transforming Your Safety Culture with Lean Management” says a lean safety program can not only improve your company’s safety record, but also help workers accept lean in your company. Here, he talks about his book and offers insight on how a lean safety program works.

Mnet: What prompted you to write this book?

Hafey: I’ve worked in manufacturing for 40 years and the last 18 to 20 years has been focused on continuous improvement, or what we know as lean today.

A few years ago, I presented several safety seminars that demonstrated how to use Kaizen-Blitz, a team-based activity where you observe a process in a 3 to 5 day span, to improve safety. The activity required the team to observe workers and look for ergonomic risks, such as repetitive heavy-lifting, and come up with ways to improve these safety issues. The group came up with 40 to 50 improvements and implemented 15 of them. In the end, workflow improved as well and that’s when it dawned on me the strong connection between safety and lean.

Oftentimes with lean, the workforce is a bit reluctant to embrace it because a lot of businesses use lean as a cost-reduction program and employees quickly figure out that lean means management is cutting costs and cutting staff. But when you focus on safety, most workers will rally around safety and it seems to be an ideal way to approach lean — from a safety perspective.

The seminars I have done on the topic have all been successful in making great safety strides as well as cycle time improvements. So if you’re looking to train your employees in lean, and you approach it from a safety perspective, they will see it as less threatening once they can see what lean can do for them and their work becomes safer and easier.

Mnet: How is lean safety different from other safety programs?

Hafey: The whole focus of the book is using lean tools like the Kaizen-Blitz, asking 'why' five times, process mapping, etc. and applying these tools to create world-class safety programs. Safety programs in most companies are compliance based — they do it because they have to follow OSHA regulations. But by taking a continuous improvement approach to safety, the program is proactive, rather than just reporting negative metrics like injuries or lost-time accidents.

As an example, in our company we take an improvement approach to safety. Our employees can submit a safety improvement and it's more than a suggestion program because they have to implement those suggestions.

When focusing on lean safety, you need a lean thinker approach to incident investigations — every incident or near miss or accident is an opportunity for safety improvements if you approach it in the right away.

Mnet: Your book mentions a rotating leadership be used to build an effective safety program. How does this work?

Hafey: A lot of businesses have a safety director and that leads a lot of people to say that person is responsible for safety, but everybody is responsible for safety. Instead, a safety program should consist of an employee-based safety team that can help engage workers in a lean safety culture.

Using non-management individuals in a 3-year term with 5 or 6 people leading the safety team can help engage your work force in safety. By involving these workers in a safety program, you start to build trust that management cares. To get to world-class anything it's really all based on trust and you have to earn your employees' trust.

Many businesses, rather than engage employees, use compliance-based programs. But lean isn't a program, it's a mindset — a way you see the world. A company that is really successful at lean has a management team that understands that. Managers that think lean is a program and use a few tools are not successful at it long-term.

Mnet: What do manufacturers need to do in order to evaluate and change their safety program?

Hafey: I would start by looking at the structure you have in place to manage safety. If you just have one person responsible for safety training people to comply with the rules, then you need to start thinking about how to engage a broader group of people in safety at your company.

Mnet: How long does it take to change a safety program using lean techniques?

Hafey: It's a cultural change — how people think, act and interact. So if you're going to change that, you're not going to do that in 6 months. It'll probably take a

couple years as it takes time for workers to understand and adjust to their new roles.

Mnet: Is there any one particular lesson you'd like readers to gain from your book?

Hafey: That you can approach lean from the safety side and it's a really nice entry point because there is probably no better way to help people understand and accept lean. If you go back to the founders of lean, the Toyota Production System, one of the foundations of the system is respect for people. So how better to show respect for people and earn their trust than genuine workplace safety improvement efforts. If you do that, you'll start building trust. And if you achieve that, you can continue other lean tools.

Also, there are so many companies that start lean and then stop lean, because they thought it was a program, again you have to impact the culture to be successful and safety is part of your culture. If you start there, you'll start building the trust necessary to start building a lean program.

Mnet: What is one key to making a lean safety program successful?

Hafey: Leadership and management's acceptance of their safety responsibilities. They have to be engaged and involved in it.

Mnet: Can you give an example of an incident and how using lean techniques would improve it?

Hafey: An individual was using a tape machine that automatically tapes around corners of boxes and the mechanism was stuck in the up position. The worker pushed it down and the blade that cuts the tape came up and just barely cut the end of the worker's finger.

The individual's supervisor wrote up the incident report and said the root cause was the employee failed to follow lockout-tagout procedures. A lot of people would stop there because the individual agreed that he failed to follow the lockout-tagout procedure.

However, as a lean thinker, you might think that's the root cause, but why did the worker push down that mechanism? Because it hung up. Well, why did the machine get stuck? Because either the air pressure wasn't set right or it malfunctioned. Well, why was the air pressure not set right? Because we're not sure what it was supposed to be set at. Some think it's supposed to be 50 psi and others say 100 psi.

So the root cause is really that the machine hung up and people didn't understand how to set it correctly. Because of that, we were able to assign the individual to work with maintenance to look into the manual to determine what the setting was supposed to be. Then they tested equipment to make sure that it worked correctly when it was set at the correct setting. That individual was asked to talk to their team and others in the plant that had the same equipment to ensure they

understood the correct setting.

Those opportunities to improve safety would have been missed if you stopped at "The individual didn't follow the lockout-tagout procedure." By asking why five times — which is a lean tool — you'll get to the real root cause so that you can improve the process rather than just focus on the person. The process is generally the problem, not the person. I fully understand that they didn't follow lockout-tagout procedure, and I accept that, but when using lean, you have to go beyond that to get to the things you can improve.

Robert Hafey has worked in manufacturing operations and maintenance for 40 years, at both U.S. Steel and Flexco. For the last 18 years, he has been directly involved in implementing continual improvements. For more information on his book, visit www.productivitypress.com [1].

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