

# The Unlearned Lesson Of Lean

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**The true power of the Lean methodology, or any business improvement program, lives not in training personnel, creating metrics, or conducting improvement events.**

The true power is a deep cultural change whereby everyone in the business exercises problem-solving skills, habitually and relentlessly. To get the benefits from our continuous improvement programs, we must create an empowered culture obsessed with improving the current state.

One of the most popular and successful business improvement methodologies to sweep U.S. industry is Lean. Many of our businesses have adopted Lean principles and practices in one form or another. It's not just manufacturing businesses; banking, insurance, and healthcare industries are also well versed in Lean methods.

Many of the businesses adopting Lean have benefitted greatly. However, very few have achieved the level of performance and business benefit from the program that they originally imagined because the deep-rooted behaviors from which the Lean methodology was derived have not been established.

James Womack, Daniel T. Jones, Alan Altshuler, and others introduced the concept of Lean and related principles to the U.S. in the 1990's. They derived the methodology from their experience at Toyota. I know, we've all heard about Toyota, Lean, the Toyota Way, Toyota Product Development, and so forth. It seems

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everyone's favorite business to benchmark, particularly in the field of product development.

Those of us who have studied some of the lessons to come out of Toyota and reasonably emulated them have benefited. However, one simple and important fact seems to get overlooked. Toyota doesn't have a "Lean" program, or a philosophical "way," and the product development system we all read about a few years ago isn't likely to be the same today.

Important questions to ask are, "What is it about Toyota that makes it the business to study," or "What is it about Toyota that makes it come up with all the things we want to emulate?" After all, if Toyota keeps it up, we'll be studying another book about them next year. So, why does Toyota have all the great secrets?

I believe the answer is that Toyota only has one secret. Toyota has a culture in which every member of the business tries to make life at Toyota better for himself/herself and his/her team and Toyota.

If your business has a continuous improvement program of any kind, answer these questions.

- Do improvements take place naturally, as a matter of day-to-day activity, or do you schedule events to plan and make improvements?
- Do people make improvements because they want to, or because they are told to?
- Can anyone in your business drive an improvement? Do improvements indeed come from anyone and everyone?
- Does the assembler on the third cell of product line X know that he/she can suggest and lead an improvement? Would he/she if she does know?
- When was the last time that someone walked up to you with a suggestion to reduce waste? Was it tried or implemented?
- If you want to make an improvement in your office or on your line, how many people have to approve it?

You can see where this is going. Many businesses implement continuous improvement programs like Lean. However, I have yet to observe one where the improvements are a natural order of business.

I frequently use a metaphor for training and skill set development. I can get every tool in the catalog and hang it up on the wall of your garage, but it won't make you a better mechanic. To become a better mechanic, you must learn how and when to use those tools, and you must practice.

To become like Toyota, though, we must take the metaphor even further. To become like Toyota, you must have a desire to obsessively tinker with your machine, using the tools, trying new tools, modifying your tools, modifying your machine, challenging your training, and developing new ways.

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If you want to truly get the most out of Lean, or Six Sigma, or Total Quality, or any other business improvement methodology, you must go beyond tools and training, and forced events. You must turn your whole organization into a nest of tinkerers.

I believe Toyota tinkers are the reasons that Toyota is always showing us new ways to do things. Supporting evidence comes from Motorola and the development of Six Sigma, an experiment in a whole new way to think about business and how money is wasted. Look at all of the innovation methods and tools your business has been studying. They all come from sources that developed them by tinkering.

How do you turn your organization into a nest of tinkerers so that you can be showing the rest of us a better way of doing things? Well, it's not easy, and it won't be quick, but it can be done. The specific tactics and methods you choose will need to depend upon your specific culture. However, there are a few basic attitudes that must be instilled so that you can achieve a new behavior set.

1. Your people must want to tinker. Ultimately, they should tinker because if they make an improvement, they will feel the benefit. This may be like teaching someone the benefits of keeping his workspace clean. It may need to start as an expectation with reward and or reprimand, but eventually you want him/her to be proud of a clean space and ashamed of a messy one. It must become cultural.
2. Your people must be empowered to tinker. No one will experiment if it takes too many levels of approval, or if there is fear of failure. No one is going to try and tune the car if they are afraid of getting reprimanded for not getting it right before the next drive. You must begin removing roadblocks. Begin a culture of complementing the effort and applauding a positive result. End culture that reprimands a failed experiment or doubts intentions or ability to succeed.
3. Your people must know how to tinker. If you let an untrained monkey with a hammer under the hood of your car, you get what you deserve. However, if you teach your friend how to tune a car and dare him/her to try it on yours, he/she very well could succeed in improving it. If he/she fails the first time, he will learn. After enough times, he/she will be teaching you and this is the gold mine.
4. You want everyone teaching everyone else what he/she has learned. You also want everyone learning regardless of who is sharing. Start the process by letting those below you on the org. chart share with you. Set the example. Make it cultural. People have got to want to share just as they have got to want to tinker.

List out the attitudes above and compare them with the attitudes you actually have. Begin making a list of the attitudes and behaviors you must change and make a plan for each one.

I'm not a fan of monetary incentives and flashy rewards as a means of driving cultural change, but they have been known to work. Just keep in mind, at some point the rewards must go away.

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If you need ideas for how to begin changing attitudes, change the context. Imagine you are teaching your child to clean his/her room, or your friend to play chess. The tactics (not necessarily the language) for those tasks will be the same for leading your people to develop new habits and adopt new skills.

Don't be frustrated that your organization isn't Toyota. In reality, you may not want it to be Toyota. But by all means, if you want more from continuous improvement, whatever the method or program, go further and build the tinkerer culture. It's what makes Toyota the business to chase, and it will do the same for yours.

Stay wise, friends.

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