Continuous Improvement In The National Pastime

Lean manufacturing tips for Major League Baseball's World Series hopefuls.

By Jeff Reinke, Editorial Director

The zeal that many have when it comes to Six Sigma and other lean manufacturing principles has led to implementation of these concepts in a number of non-manufacturing situations. For example, it wasn't too long ago that we documented how employees at Cummins actually used these initiatives to enhance their bowling scores.

This got me thinking about other potential applications for these philosophies, with professional sports seeming like a natural fit. And right now, the first one that comes to mind is baseball. As we enter the playoffs, it seems there have been a number of examples, both positive and negative, from which we might be able to learn more in the journey toward continuous improvement. With that in mind, consider:

- The **New York Mets** had been in fine shape all year. They had a sizeable lead in their division entering the final two weeks of the season, but forgot that continuous improvement is a constant journey. They became complacent and soon a number of inefficient pitching outings, a lack of defensive focus (preventive maintenance, if you will) and a down-turn in overall team morale left them out of the playoffs. Many now think that a dramatic series of events must take place in order to alter the negative team culture that might be in place.
- In contrast, the **Philadelphia Phillies** and **Colorado Rockies** offer a great example of Kaizan implementation. They set goals and kept on their targeted course without making any major adjustments. This approach best suited their continuous improvement focus throughout the year, and their goals were realized with peak output in the final month of the season. This is how they were able to make up significant ground and then move past their competition in getting to the playoffs.

- The **New York Yankees**, who will never qualify for a lean approach, offer a nice case study in 5S. They sorted through their major and minor league resources and standardized their line-ups after some early struggles, which helped strengthen the team. They were then able to sustain the advantage they had achieved in making the playoffs. The shine element was already there.
- To my beloved **Milwaukee Brewers**, I'd like to offer some lessons in Kanban. Although they also blew an early season advantage, it wasn't a lack of continuous improvement focus that led to their problems. Rather, it was inefficient placement of scoring opportunities. While their total run production was solid, it relied very heavily on the home run. So instead of bundling hits together in scoring multiple runs in one inning, the team waited for a couple of people to score runs with a single, individual hit. This led to inconsistent results and uneven output.
- The **Boston Red Sox** and **Cleveland Indians** also did some fine 5S work, but their path to the playoffs probably has more to do with a solid preventive maintenance program. Both teams got out to good starts and held their lead, in part, due to a lack of injuries and additions at the trading deadline that helped improve their pitching and defense.

Competition, whether it's on the baseball diamond or manufacturing floor, is intense in this country. If you falter, someone will take your place. The key is to stay focused on your game. Establishing a plan, putting the right people in place and then trusting those individuals to execute that plan works in both situations. The hard part is understanding whether or not your approach is better than your competitor's, but that's why the term is continuous improvement. Because if you stop playing in August, you'll be watching in October.
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[1] mailto:jeff.reinke@advantagemedia.com