Made Lean in America

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I was struck by a comment made by Rhode Island Governor Don Carcieri in his presentation to the Northeast Shingo Conference: At the turn of the 19th Century, his state was *first* in the nation in manufacturing, virtually the birthplace of modern manufacturing in the U.S. and a leader in wealth creation.

But, a little over a century later, Rhode Island ranks near the bottom rung in manufacturing jobs, and as the U.S. economy struggles to rebound, Rhode Island's unemployment rate is 49th of 50 in the nation. The governor's speech was essentially a call to arms, a reminder that that we've forgotten: "Somebody has to *make* something in order to create value."

That seemingly self-evident observation continues to elude decision-makers, both in industry and government, who have been quick to export manufacturing plants and jobs overseas. Lower taxes and lower wages provide short-term relief to manufacturers seeking immediate cost savings, but the long-term effects are devastating to our future quality of life.

And the relentless exodus of good jobs from our shores is no longer limited to manufacturing. A friend of mine, a radiologist, confided in me recently that he hopes he'll be able to hang on to his job to see his kids through college. He is in a profession that is now being outsourced to lower wage overseas locales. We are even losing patient care to far-off places.

With the relentless increase in healthcare costs, patients are opting to travel the globe for affordability. Hospitals, too, need to find a way to continue to provide world-class healthcare at competitive prices.

Listening to the governor's comments, we resolved to rally our Northeast constituents for our conference to show how and why America can regain a leadership position for productivity and quality in a global marketplace. Our theme, Made *Lean* in America, highlighted organizations that have emerged as market leaders through consistent use of Lean philosophy and techniques.

And we featured enlightened leaders from government who, too, have learned that tax burdens on business can be eased when Lean thinking is applied. From our healthcare providers, we explored how the best medical care is provided locally and affordably. For these organizations, Lean means creating employment opportunities at home: Good jobs, a strong tax base, a brighter future.

We believe that the tide is turning towards "re-shoring" jobs and capability that America has lost in the last two decades, and that the time to rally our Lean community is here. Long-term thinking is emerging: America *can* compete through use of Lean thinking.

In 1989, the first year of the Shingo Prize, its namesake, Shigeo Shingo proclaimed that he wanted to “give back to America” for the lessons he’d learned from American innovators. His genius is there for organizations that will take up the challenge to compete through Lean. We don’t begrudge those in far-off places that are trying to establish a standard of living to which we have become accustomed, and we don’t have blinders on. Distribution of manufacturing and services makes sense in a world market. But we’d like to keep our share of those resources at home.

What’s your take? Please feel free to leave a comment below. For more information, please visit www.oldleandude.org *[1].*

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