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Demystifying Lean

Lean Thinking! That's how best to phrase it, I think. For me lean is thinking about things differently, changing how you approach things and providing you with a mindset ready for continuous improvement.

Not everyone thinks that way though. I've heard lean, and myself, being accused of many things including: just being a "tool head"; here to streamline or going to make one size fit all; have a hidden agenda that I just want to impose; here's the Blue Peter approach to improvement and it only works in manufacturing.

Tool Head

Yes, there are loads of tools that can be used to improve things. Yes, as a lean practitioner I know a few of them. Thankfully I keep discovering more because as with anything that needs fixing or fine tuning you need the right tool to do the right job. But lean is not about the tools. Lean is about providing a framework that lays out a journey of improvement such that you can pick the right tool for where you are on that journey.

Lean, at its core, has five principles: -

- **Value** – this is about understanding who your customer/beneficiary of what you are doing is. Then discovering what it is they value about your service i.e. what they think they need and what they actually need from you. Armed with this you can start to manage the customer expectation and ensure that you always deliver what is actually needed.
- **Value Stream** – once you understand what the value is then you need to figure out how you deliver that value today. This is traditionally known as "understanding your current state".
- **Flow** – now we really need to make that value flow smoothly, removing the obstacles in its way. Here we tackle the activities that are wasteful and absorb our time and effort without providing any real benefit.
- **Pull** – this is where we need to make sure that what is needed is ready for when the customer needs it. This involves understanding the demand that is on our services and making sure we are in a position to meet that demand.
- **Pursue Perfection** – quite simply this is about continuous improvement. The world around us is constantly changing and therefore how we do things needs to respond to the change.

So that's the framework, the journey, the philosophy or whatever you want to call it. It's how lean people think and therefore how they approach what they do.

Streamlining and One Size Fits All

The words efficient and effective don't always bring joy to peoples' hearts. Some see these words as a threat. I think people automatically think that this means things will be taken away. Whilst lean is trying to help you deliver more with the same resource it can highlight that you need additional resource to deliver what is needed.

In reality lean provides hard evidence on which to make decisions. It provides data on what needs to be delivered and the resource needed to deliver it. Based on this, decisions can be made to prioritise, stop doing things or obtain additional resource.

Imposing Change

I would absolutely love to be able to walk into an area, review how they do things and then tell them how to improve it. My life would be so much easier! Unfortunately, no changes would ever be made and if anything was changed it certainly wouldn't last long.

Likened it to someone coming in and rearranging your kitchen for you. They may change it to the best layout ever but two minutes after they are out the door those spoons will be back where you had them! We are just as precious about our working practices even if we hate them!

The problem is people! And the solution is people!

Sustainable change can only be done by the people who do the job. Teaching them a whole load of tools and techniques won't do it, you need to give them a framework to hang it off of because that way you change the way they think about things. Did I mention lean was a framework and a different way of think about things?

Blue Peter

Sometimes I'm accused of this because I walk around with a box full of fancy stationery and sometimes it's because it all seems too simple.

Fancy stationery are my tools. The doctor doesn't just use a stethoscope, the mechanic doesn't just use a spanner and a lean person doesn't just use a pale yellow post it. I use this stationery to help people understand how things are working, stop things from being hidden and see a process in its entirety.

As to its simplicity is it lean that is too simple or the output that is too simple or both? Good! Then we should be able to understand it and if we understand it, then we should be able to do it. Making it more complex does not make it better nor does making it simple dismiss the complex nature of our processes. What lean is trying to do is make it understandable, by making it understandable we are better able to make informed changes.

Manufacturing

Yes, this is where it all started. Toyota and their production system have a lot to answer for. Then Womack and Jones did a review of manufacturing and went and labelled it "Lean" and defined the five principles. Go on take another look at those five principles and tell me they don't apply to your work.

You cannot take what is written down about lean for manufacturing and apply it directly to finance or to health care or to higher education. You cannot take what one higher education institution has done with lean and apply it in exactly the same way in yours. That's the beauty of lean it's a framework that allows you to shape it how you need it.

The five principles are the core, these stay the same no matter what you are looking at. Respect for people is the essence that ties it all together and makes it work. I said at the start that the lean framework details the journey, how you approach that journey needs to be right for you. Use lean to help you define the purpose of what you are doing, use lean to help you make your processes work towards that purpose and use lean to make sure your people are driving it all forward.

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