



Several veteran lean practitioners—industry leaders in their categories who have been on their lean journeys for three to 15 years—recently hosted a “CEO Boot Camp,” which was designed to create a “live” experience for leaders new to lean on what it takes to personally lead a lean transformation.

Most of the leaders on this trip were from companies that had already started to implement lean, but that implementation was not being spearheaded by them personally. One epiphany they had was that in order for the transformation to be broad-reaching and successful, they would need to increase their own personal involvement in the process and master both strategic lean concepts and tactical tools. There were many such key nuggets that emerged at the conclusion of this lightning tour.

Perhaps the most important “take away” is that lean is not a cost-reduction effort, but rather is a *business strategy for growth*. It's not something that happens overnight and initial savings aren't a signal to sit back and relax, but instead a call to work even harder. When a company chooses to undertake a lean transformation, its leadership must realize that lean works in the long term—lean must become a *way of life*.

A common trait observed among the host lean leaders at the companies visited was an unwavering trust in the process, despite failures or setbacks, and a ferocious patience to keep going, understanding that continuous improvement is just that—unending.

When embarking on a lean journey, focus is critical. Taking a “shotgun approach” to lean is a big mistake. Leaders need to narrow and deepen the focus of the effort to take advantage of specific opportunities, like paying down debt or entering a new market. Focusing on a few critical areas will actually speed the rate of change in a way a broader, shallower approach can't.

Policy deployment takes a prominent place in a lean transformation. Although huge benefits can be generated in the first steps of a lean journey, the secret to sustained success is planning. And policy deployment is the means by which a company defines its goals and then aligns the entire organization to work toward a common cause.

All of the attendees expressed their belief that personal participation or lack thereof could make or break the process. They learned that daily “walk throughs,” managing for daily improvement, and using daily metrics to measure progress and manage abnormalities are critical tools of lean (see Tech Talk, p. 10). It became profoundly clear to them that hour-by-hour visible charts are the backbone of the process—the means by which first-line supervisors can monitor the pulse of the plant and correct abnormalities in real time.

Recognition that consistently “making the hour” means you'll also “make the month” (and the year) was a profound revelation. Visual management is also closely tied in with these concepts. Using management tools that anyone can understand at a glance means that even an uninitiated workforce can contribute to lean improvements. It increases involvement across the board and limits mistakes caused by misunderstandings.

Another significant observation from boot camp attendees was that the cultures across the four companies visited were amazingly consistent. People were involved at all levels, teamwork was the rule and not the exception, and resources were clearly dedicated to the lean transformation efforts.

Likewise, they all noted that a hallmark of a lean transformation is clear, significant, and measurable results. There's no guessing if the lean methodologies are working. Real results—financial, physical, and cultural—can be observed, measured, and cataloged.

A lean journey is not quick, nor is it easy. But what these CEOs learned is that committing to the journey and following through, remaining patient, and forging ahead with speed despite any failures will enable their companies to profit and grow—and achieve true excellence—in an increasingly competitive and global marketplace.

In this issue you will read about demand segmentation in a lean value chain and how one company synchronized operations and order fulfillment to customer demand (p. 2). You will also find articles on the role of a steering committee (p. 5), eLearning (p. 6), using audits to sustain kaizen results (p. 12), and how one company realized significant savings by paying attention to energy use (p. 16). Successful lean organizations are learning organizations, and I hope you will find valuable lessons in these pages. ■

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