Flexible Approaches to Implementing Lean Manufacturing

Running your company as efficiently as possible has become critical in recent years and even more urgent during the struggles of today's economy. Some alternative approaches are beginning to help companies implement Lean Manufacturing improvements quickly, inexpensively, and without overburdening staff resources.

This article will briefly describe four new approaches being pioneered in an effort to make Lean implementation available to all companies regardless of their financial situation or personnel constraints. No matter what approach you take to becoming Lean, allow yourself and your staff to enjoy the process. Few events in manufacturing are as exciting or dramatic as radically improving your workplace and the camaraderie of good people eagerly engaged in making the company better and stronger for everyone. Focus any of the programs described below at your company's "Constraints" and you will increase throughput and profits while substantially reducing waste.

Lean On the Run: Perhaps one of the most innovative approaches to implementing Lean quickly and with minimal downtime, Lean On the Run uses the experience and talents of a Lean Consultant/ Facilitator, an assistant, and occasional help from the "team" or staff assigned to the area being improved. In practical terms, an important area of business functioning is selected for rapid improvement to achieve defined goals and objectives. The "team" participates in a brief but convincing training session and demonstration of Lean principles, after which they are released to the shop floor to begin work as usual. The facilitator and assistant then get very busy progressing through a discovery process examining the target area and every aspect of its functioning. The pair carefully observes, learns the process, and solicits input from the operators/staff to acquire needed data. You might say the facilitator and assistant function something like a computer's "CPU" gathering data, processing it, and then providing output for decision-making. Periodically, the team is "huddled" together to discuss observations, try out new methods, and make operational/functional decisions. When a clear vision of improvements needed is agreed upon by the team and management, a plan is developed to implement the improvements at the earliest opportunity. Normally, full implementation will require an 8-10 hr. commitment spread over a week's time, for 6-10 people. This is less than 20% of the usual time needed for standard "Kaizen Events" or "Blitzes." Downtime is kept to a minimum by making major changes during off-shifts, temporarily building additional inventory to offset any interruptions, and other effective strategies. This approach works particularly well when companies have reduced staff or are simply too busy to slow or shut down production for extended periods.

OJT Lean: Most states now have funds available to help companies upgrade the skills of their workforce through "Custom Fit" and OJT (On The Job Training) programs. These funds are typically used to "invest" in local companies for the collateral benefits gained for local and state economic development. The focus is less "team" based and more dependent on the trainer/trainee(s) relationship and their engagement in applying improvement activities throughout the company. Implementing Lean Manufacturing techniques throughout the company while transferring "Lean Expertise" to the in-house "Improvement Manager" trainee(s) is the goal of this program. Hours of instruction are conducted in a primarily hands-on fashion as the Lean expert teaches, coaches, and collaboratively implements various aspects of Lean Manufacturing throughout the company. Trainees are given improvement assignments and are mentored through this process in an intensive four to six month undertaking that makes Lean experts out of existing staff. This approach eliminates the need

for increasing head-count, implements the majority of the "big bang" Lean techniques, and insures deep level understanding and capabilities of the trainee(s). After the training period, the expert level "Improvement Manager(s)" guide the company through new improvement initiatives as needed without further outside support.

Lean Right Now: This is a typical "Kaizen Event" or "Improvement Blitz" approach with a few twists. The "Lean Right Now" approach exemplifies engaging in the implementation of real improvements with a diverse team made up of committed individuals from throughout the company to affect significant change very quickly. Emphasis is placed on strategic, tactical employment of Lean tools that increase throughput and reduce waste almost immediately. "Analysis Paralysis," or overanalyzing issues to the point that nothing actually gets done is avoided by using this methodology. Typically, this approach will require the full-time efforts of 6-10 people for five days to achieve full implementation in a single area or concern. When creatively engaged and empowered, "Blitz Teams" routinely achieve incredible results using this approach. It is among the more costly programs with regards to committed staff resources, but typically results in some of the largest improvements and greatest team buy-in. Team buy-in, commitment, and empowerment ensure long-term effective improvement activities. If you have the ability to commit 6-10 people to this process for a week it is among the most powerful approaches to implementing Lean available.

Walkabout Lean: From the "land down under" the term "walkabout" refers to someone taking a long walk, exploring, taking a look around, etc. That's the beginning of this approach to implementing Lean. A Lean expert carefully looks over the production facility along with a very knowledgeable in-house plant expert, noting where urgent attention is most needed. Improvement opportunities are prioritized to the company's critical success factors and plans are laid to systematically address the improvements promising the greatest impact sequentially. Operators are observed and asked for regular input and occasionally some help, but are mostly left to their jobs. Using available personnel from focus areas and throughout the company, major improvements are accomplished in a very flexible and fluid process. This technique is most useful when staffing is tight, or production is unable to slowdown during the improvement process. A skilled facilitator can make this a "team process" by carefully listening to and incorporating input from area operators. Generally, however, this approach will not initially increase the "team buy-in" that other approaches foster. On a serious budget of time or staff this approach can deliver fast and powerful results with little disruption. Don't let the quirky name for this approach fool you, when you turn an improvement expert lose in your plant exciting and important changes will not be far behind.

Using these streamlined approaches to becoming Lean very quickly and inexpensively will help companies become stronger and more profitable with unprecedented speed over more conventional implementation programs. To be very realistic, dramatic improvements are exiting, but creating a culture that embraces and sustains Lean processes as well as implementing Lean throughout an entire company is a long-term endeavor. It should also be noted that becoming Lean is only part of the equation. Developing your staff with cross-training opportunities and validating their input on company issues, etc., will yield benefits such as innovation and loyalty for years to come. Furthermore, don't forget to have fun with your transition to Lean Manufacturing. Sure, some of the obstacles will be formidable, but the improvement process is generally very exciting and rewarding for all involved. For more information please contact:

Bill Hanover 435-792-4380 jb@tpslean.com