



The Muscle Behind Lean:
strength and vision are the
lynchpins of sustainable change

Aligning the efficiency of Lean with the muscle of directed vision.

When companies seek change, leadership and managers at all levels understand that there will be challenges.

The search for sustainable results makes implementing change an ongoing effort. Doug Newman, Senior Vice President at Celerant Consulting Americas, says that companies must alter the way their managers apply knowledge and tools to drive continuous improvement.

Companies will need a platform and a program, they will need assistance from outside experts, and they will have to trust in a new way of looking at their enterprise. Whether they implement Lean Manufacturing, Six Sigma, or a combination of these and other disciplines, they expect their company will be stronger, faster, better. When an improvement project is scoped out, managers might toast to a new dawn, sit back, and await the much-anticipated ROI.

But there is a stark reality that is frequently left out of their mental preparation: transformation is not an isolated event. Once the project is over, the change goes on; the organization must act differently to achieve different results, or the benefits take their leave soon after the implementation team.

The search for sustainable results makes implementing change an ongoing effort that stretches from end to end of an enterprise, and as it unfolds companies must alter the way their managers apply knowledge and tools to drive continuous improvement.

To gain and maintain the product leadership or process leadership that is central to business strategy, the tone must be set at the top by strong managers, and the “muscles” of the enterprise – those who take action and leadership roles – must understand and adapt to the change. The ability to build a team that rises to this challenge will be the lynchpin that keeps the organization on track for long-term success. The process of “muscle building” must be executed in lock step with the launch of a

lean transformation, with three primary considerations that will guide leaders:

Create a vision and environment of success
Company leaders must understand that transformation cannot be delegated away. Their vision must become the organization’s vision, and the entire workforce must own and value the change together.

To ensure that the environment takes root and is maintained as the new paradigm, leaders must articulate the vision, share ownership, establish Key Performance Indicators, and then monitor and communicate progress to encourage ongoing buy-in.

The glue in all this, and one of the things that distinguishes the best run companies, is a comprehensive Performance Management system that helps information flow quickly from executive level to the shop floor and back again. The system should encourage real collaboration, ensure timely decision making and action at each level, role model the optimal set of behaviors to drive a culture of performance, and relentlessly focus on the discipline of getting things done.

As change takes shape, executives must clearly and continuously let the workforce know how their efforts are contributing to success and how the transformation is translating into results. In the long term, it is these managers and employees that will make the difference – not just the team that spearheaded implementation.

Foster a self-sufficient culture of change

A common thread among companies that will benefit from a Lean transformation program is that they often lack the managerial strength necessary to implement it. Legacy operational methods that may be inefficient or have not evolved with the market are ingrained in these organizations, and changing those routines is no easy task.

With that in mind, reorienting the management team and a critical mass of supervisors is often the first step to a sustained improvement program. It is not enough to devise a solution and point the team in a new direction, they must be empowered to use the same techniques and processes that consultants use to create a Lean environment.

Managers should first engage in training on the finer points of their new organizational system. Devoting just one or two hours per day to learning the ropes can make a tremendous difference during the first six weeks of implementation. Managers get a better grasp on ideas such as how to use Kanban cards to track production and product movement, how downstream processes need to obtain pieces from upstream, and how the production process needs to ensure quality.

This new knowledge should be put to work immediately in order for the teams to see results and experience firsthand how the workforce adapts. It is one thing to have outside firms police the workforce, it is entirely another

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and more effective approach for the teams themselves to be part of the integration.

When training is complete, managers should work hand in hand with consultants and/or internal project teams to get a feel for the full range of activities and potential. Within three months, teams will be self-sufficient, stable, and able to independently maintain a climate of continuous change.

Bringing in managerial talent from other organizations can also provide tremendous lift. When supervisory positions are at least partially staffed with horizontal hires from the outside, they bring with them experience, skills, and methods from their former companies that a vertical hire would lack. This kind of turnover not only provides an incentive for current managers to remain on top of their game, but it also keeps the company fresh. By relentlessly infusing the organization with new ideas and skill sets, they can dramatically improve their long-term performance.

Start on a strong note

Once managers and technicians understand the goals and are on board with their roles, infusing a company with a results-oriented culture will be a continuous learning experience. One of the most important choices leaders will face as they embark on such a project is whether to launch immediately and trust that momentum will gather under the new philosophy, or whether to set in stone a full foundation of process and metrics before taking true action.

The best path may lie in between. For a company that is developing new metrics, it can take months to establish comprehensive measurement tools and processes to support them. The attractive alternative is to create a small set of critical metrics and tools with which to launch, allowing the workforce to apply their new mind set and generate quick, tangible results.

As they see the value of the first set of pragmatic tools, they will be more willing to ramp the system up to its full capacity. In this way, their initial enthusiasm will extend – and that is the key to sustainability. Knowing their value is more motivating than knowing their position, and once they have a grasp on their contribution to results they will be a powerful force in carrying the transformed company to higher levels of productivity and profitability.

Sustaining strength

When organizations pursue Six Sigma and Lean Manufacturing without first explicitly tying these approaches to clear operational and business objectives, the tools lack the legitimacy of compelling purpose. That means there will be misunderstanding, misconception, and mistakes in implementation; results will be short lived because the long term objectives were never clear to begin with.

Above all, then, managers must set the tone by words and deeds as they embark on a transformation.

Aligning the efficiency of Lean with the muscle of directed vision will create an environment in which long term goals can be met, day to day impact can be appreciated, and ROI can be sustained.

For over 20 years, Celerant Consulting has delivered successful, sustainable change for world leading companies. Our expertise covers the entire spectrum of the Operations Management ecosystem, with a core focus on Performance Improvement and Behavioral Change Management. Every project is a long-term partnership where we get down on the ground to identify and analyze a client's most significant business challenges, then work with them to drive up results. We provide operational strategy and implement strategic operational solutions that capitalize on existing systems, processes and people - and deliver substantial benefits.

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