
Use a Soft Touch to Improve Lean Processing

Wednesday July 29, 2009

Topic: Efficiency Management

Reference: Fine, David, Hansen, Maia A., and Roggenhofer, Stefan. "From lean to lasting: Making operational improvements stick." The McKinsey Quarterly: http://www.mckinseyquarterly.com/article_print.aspx?l2=21&l3=37&ar=2254. February 10, 2009.

I find that there is never a great time to review processes and to implement structural changes. There are always more pressing needs in product development, sales, client initiatives, and dealing with compliance concerns. You have to be dedicated to process reform and that means changing resource allocations, challenging teams to produce more significant changes, and spending time in meetings to get mindshare on process improvements.

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I find that there is never a great time to review processes and to implement structural changes. There are always more pressing needs in product development, sales, client initiatives, and dealing with compliance concerns. You have to be dedicated to process reform and that means changing resource allocations, challenging teams to produce more significant changes, and spending time in meetings to get mindshare on process improvements. Few people really enjoy doing the hard work and unless managed properly they will find other ways to occupy their time. However, leaning processes and improving operations are critical to identifying new efficiency opportunities and producing better results. In the referenced article the commentators make the same observations and ultimately determine that leaning processes can be made more successful when attention is paid to "soft" side concerns like employee mindsets, senior management involvement and using staff with the authority to make changes stick. "Overlooking the softer side, however, drastically lowers any initiative's odds of success. Some companies, for example, rush to implement the tool kit without ensuring that their employees-including managers-are prepared to work and lead in new and different ways. In such cases, "initiative fatigue" and even distrust may set in, and efficiency gains fizzle out as the black belts move on to other projects." Applying hard tools, data management and setting agendas is not enough to get the job done. Instead the commentators advocate using a balanced approach to align organizational structures and mindsets with the overall objectives; coaching and explaining the rationale for the approach taken; and creating a real sense of purpose. Having worked on projects in this area for a number of years, I believe that the commentators have made an important improvement to lean theory here. Clearly cognizance of the human dynamic and cultural factors can only improve on lean tools. The tools are likely to be better utilized by engaged employees with a real sense of purpose. I agree with the philosophy and I will continue to adapt these principles to my own processes. Let me know how you are dealing with implementing lean improvements as well.