



3 STRATEGIES for Lean leaders

THAT HAVE NO ONE
TO LEAD

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This guide is for the internal change agent seeking actionable techniques to drive change in the absence of leadership support.

3 Strategies for Lean Leaders That Have No One to Lead

The door to the production floor opens, and the sounds and smells of manufacturing hit you. It's unmistakable. There's just something about creating and building and making things that you can recognize no matter what industry you're in, what kind of factory you have, or who the people are.

That last part is what makes things really interesting: the people. Who they are, how many of them, what they do and what they say, are all the elements that change a manufacturing plant into a real company; a place run by an organization made up of departments and teams, leaders and followers.

The landscape is marked by machines and materials, and the environment is controlled with processes and policies. But the work gets done by the people.

And in that mix of roles with responsibilities carrying out daily activities, navigating the blurred lines drawn around who is supposed to do what, when they should do it (and how), lives a lone wolf. A leader without a team. A manager without a department. An agent of change without an agency.

This person is known by many different names across many different companies, but is tasked with one recognizable, unmistakable, universal challenge: to “implement Lean.”

The form and function of this person's role is disguised in creative ways by Human Resources to define the scope as one that commands attention and deserves high praise. Yet the structure surrounding this individual's unique set of skills leaves much to be desired.

If you're reading this guide, this person is probably you.

Here are just a few examples of how you're described on job boards or inside HR files (and what they don't say that's actually true):

Continuous Improvement Program Manager - hired to make the continuous improvement program wildly successful (but no such program exists for you to manage).

3 STRATEGIES FOR LEAN LEADERS

Lean Coordinator - brought on board to implement Lean processes (but no baseline of Lean activities actually takes place for you to coordinate).

Process Engineer promoted to Lean Manufacturing Leader – tasked with driving Lean metrics into the manufacturing process (but you haven't been assigned a team or given a position of authority from which to lead).

Lean Facilitator – in charge of improving safety, quality, and delivery (but you have to beg, borrow, and steal to fill a room with enough people just to facilitate the most basic training).

These generic tags and taglines are common across all industries. They state a purpose opposed by so many forces, it's almost like a mean trick giving someone the job. This stems from an epidemic that continues to plague organizations: an ever-increasing push for Lean and Continuous Improvement "programs" to give customers the perception that value delivery is top priority. Yet the activities required to make the right improvements are rarely (if ever) prioritized.

During your time in one of these roles you've likely experienced conversations like this:

You as Lean Manager: "The high WIP between steps is a result how we schedule production. I believe we can lower those levels with some simple triggers downstream that start or stop the flow."

Operations VP: "That sounds great. But we're already pulling. I don't ship anything until trucks are scheduled. Plus, I need the WIP so no one runs dry. I can't have people standing around."

You as Continuous Improvement Engineer: "In our value stream map, we identified verbal communication as the current state method of controlling production. The team came up with some great ideas to standardize the info and use visual controls to make it easy to spot breakdowns."

President: "Don't bother with visuals and magnetic boards. We're implementing ERP in a couple months and that will take care of it. Focus on identifying correct staffing levels. That's our real problem."

You as Lean Facilitator: "I've noticed the way we solve problems is to band-aid them and move on. The data I've collected shows that about half the delays on the line are due to the same 4 recurring issues. We could really benefit from Problem Solving training and root cause prevention techniques."

Plant Manager: "We don't have time or resources to do training. Just come up with some solutions yourself and send out an email detailing your plans. The Supervisors can share it with their people."

3 STRATEGIES FOR LEAN LEADERS

These are frustrating conversations taking place every day. The struggle to shift peer behaviors toward proactive improvement is difficult enough. But when the ruling authorities take the wind right out of the sails of change, it's crippling to anyone attempting to improve a process (or company) from the inside.

The worst case scenario for those champions of change goes like this:

VP: "You've been a great addition to the company, and we recognize all the improvement ideas you've come up with. They are important, and we know we need to do more Lean. But it was a slow year and we need to cut back on project work. Unfortunately we're eliminating your position effective today."

This is real. It happens.

I know.

But I've learned. I've learned the methods to overcome the risk of valiant continuous improvement efforts being pushed aside so that crisis mode and firefighting can occupy center stage. I've learned the techniques that provide an effective substitute for having no team to lead or department to manage, but having the responsibility to improve everything.

I've grouped together my favorite (and most effective) courses of action into 3 strategies anyone can use to get positive results and become an influential leader of successful change.

- 1 Strategy 1:** Select strong allies that have teams of their own
- 2 Strategy 2:** Find an apprentice
- 3 Strategy 3:** Host "free events"

At the end of this guide are 3 worksheets, one for each strategy. Use them to get started. I recommend working on Strategy 1 first until you start to see results, then move on to Strategy 2, and finally Strategy 3.

I invite you to try this. If nothing else, I promise you'll find new abilities of your own that will prove highly beneficial to your career. Best case, you'll see the biggest obstacles to carrying out your duties start to fade, and the path to improvement success become more visible.

Good luck!

STRATEGY #1

Select strong allies that have teams of their own

The Point: Developing a strong partnership with individuals who already control the work content of a portion of the business, or a section of the process, will give you instant access to the people following that person's lead. They must have mutual respect and shared enthusiasm with their team, so selection of the right partners is key.

The Process: Whether you're new in the role or to the company, or have years of struggle and despair under your belt, the selection is the same. Here are 3 distinct personalities you can quickly identify that are sure to make strong allies:

"The High-Fiver" He's always walking through the plant giving out "atta boys" like they're going out of style. People joke around with him for a minute or two and then get right down to business. The white board in his office is used for brainstorming ideas, not for the boss's to-do lists or scribbles from an urgent meeting 6 months ago. He's constantly scanning the business for the next big thing – a major win that will change the game.

"The New Person" She stops by your cubicle daily, at the same time. She tells you positive stories about the work her previous company did with Lean. It's not a bragging session, but you detect a sense of pride. She didn't leave that job because she was miserable. She's opportunistic, and chances are her skills and knowledge will be very useful compliments to your efforts.

"The Real Boss" This is the 'get it done' guy, or the 'knows everything that's going on, always' gal who is consistently busy but never overwhelmed. You ask this person a favor by email and before you leave for the day it's done. Somehow. This person isn't necessarily a manager or leader of a specific team, but he or she has the respect and admiration of just about everyone. They've learned to navigate the BS and get others to take action, at all levels of the organization.

Keep an eye out specifically for these personalities. When you identify them, insert yourself into their patterns by asking to sit in on a team meeting, or grab a late coffee and wax poetic on their white board Friday afternoon. These people aren't afraid to share what they do and what they know.

The Payoff: Once you've made contact with one (or all 3) of these people, latch on for dear life. Pull them into your world of improvement and thinking differently. Create a shared vision of what could be. Provide the strategic factors like alignment to business objectives, or solving systemic problems that are hurting company performance. But let them execute the tactical

side of things their way. Establish a basic understanding within the partnership that you will provide their teams with better tools and a deeper understanding of Lean methods, and they will drive the course of action to deploy those new skills. You'll be surprised at how fast they get things done.

STRATEGY #2

Find an apprentice

The Point: Hollywood can get this across very effectively. In just about every film where the wily ol' master has dug himself into a deep rut, an energetic, under-skilled but overachieving youngster comes along and quickly evolves into the master's source of inspiration; a motivational force stemming from a one-directional relationship that evolves into a mutual teaching experience.

Money Ball.

Pay It Forward.

Million Dollar Baby.

The list is long, the emotions are powerful, and the message is the same: you can't do it all forever; eventually you'll burn out and lose your will to go on. If, by chance, you meet someone else whose survival depends on your revival, consider yourself blessed.

That's great, but this isn't Hollywood, is it?

Don't leave this encounter up to chance! Deliberately seek out an apprentice, and you'll discover a new sense of determination in yourself that will lead to big accomplishment. Plus you'll develop the next master to help spread the good word.

The Process: Similar to the first strategy, there are 3 key personalities to search for that will make an exceptional apprentice for developing Lean behavior and studying Lean thinking.

"The Barrier Buster" She gets onto teams and assumes roles that are above expectations for her position, rank, or title. He speaks out in meetings at the risk of getting shot down every single time. They reply to your emails with at least the same amount of detailed thought that you put into yours (in other words, someone who read your message more than once to make sure and fully understand it).

3 STRATEGIES FOR LEAN LEADERS

"The Wanderer" This is someone who wanders from his or her primary responsibility and tries to get in on the action you're in charge of. He even offers critiques of your plans and results, but follows up with suggestions or a different spin. She challenges you with new perspective, making your "pitch" to others more likely to resonate or instill action.

"The Idea Collector" This person doesn't tightly hold onto his or her own ideas, and can't wait to grab the dry erase markers and record what everyone else is saying. Some people prefer to compile ideas and then apply their creative genius to the selection process. Think Watson to Holmes, or Woz to Jobs.

As you search for potential candidates (or they search for you), don't let age or experience play into your selection. Look for the signs of any of these 3 personalities and spend some time getting to know the person one-on-one. Go out for lunch or set up some meeting time when things are calm, and have a conversation about goals. Listen intently for phrases like "I wish..." or "if only..." and see how closely their imagined ideal state matches yours.

Once the connection is made, establish a framework to move forward. Express your interest in coaching the individual and learning from each other. Set some common objectives you can measure so the relationship remains productive in the context of the business. They'll learn a new philosophy and approach to the work. For you it's about keeping motivated to press on and fight the good fight.

The Payoff: Just like in Hollywood, there's a moment of greatness where the apprentice shines bright and the master looks on, proudly. Those moments will reinforce your self-confidence in what you know and what you teach. Spread it, share it, use it wisely. You'll notice an increase in favorable response to your ideas and recruitment of help to knock out some of those long-overdue kaizen opportunities. The added bonus is a capable sidekick who can assist you in the quest.

STRATEGY #3

Host "free events"

Be creative and stage an event like a free networking meetup, or an art exhibit with food. The goal is to attract the people who enjoy socializing with a purpose. Odds are, those people will be open to trying different things, or at least learning something new.

3 STRATEGIES FOR LEAN LEADERS

The Point: Manufacturing companies all have the same basic set of elements – materials, machines, processes, and products. The work gets done by the people. The “work” includes creative thinking, idea generation, problem solving, learning, and socializing.

Yes, socializing.

You’d be hard pressed to find a company where socializing doesn’t influence how and when things get done. Leverage that and leverage the people who know how to socialize productively, with purpose. If you steer the focus toward training and doing, this is an effective technique for accomplishing important activities that don’t get the prioritization they deserve.

The Process: Here’s a few simple ways to attract those individuals and put on a fun event that generates results. Remember, you’re the one “responsible for continuous improvement,” right? Recruit a team that’s capable of getting it done, without worrying about payroll departments or reporting structure.

“Be better than FYI” No one wants to view a bunch a slides and listen to a monotone presentation about Lean Tools while they eat. If they show up, it's because they're avoiding something (or someone) else. Offer live demos or guest speakers - something worth Tweeting about. Today, with tools like Skype and WebEx, you can ask people from all over the world to field live questions for 30 minutes, or take the audience on a virtual tour of a Lean facility. Plain text bullet points no longer rule the projector screen.

Promote the event. Charge admission: 1 improvement idea, to be entered into a raffle, where the drawing takes place at the end of the show. The idea selected will be the next one implemented.

“Make it interactive” Aim to generate actionable plans that can be executed during the event. If you’ve ever held a yard sale, you probably borrowed folding tables from your neighbor, created cardboard signs a day or two before your permit started (you had a permit, right?), and then recruited a couple friends to help haul a bunch of junk up from the basement that afternoon. Treat the “free event” like a yard sale. Have in mind some basic goals and then rally the troops just a day or two in advance.

Draw up some hand-written fliers and post them around the office and break room. Announce an equipment moving party, or a 1-Day-Only-Sort-Sale, and offer snacks and gift cards to anyone who shows up. The only details required are time and place. Have a basic condition in mind you’re aiming to improve, and let the yard sale crashers do the rest.

“Make it memorable” Can you remember your favorite business update meeting of all time? Or your top 3 training meetings? They were probably all equally boring and seemingly not

3 STRATEGIES FOR LEAN LEADERS

applicable to you at the time, so it's unlikely you can. But do you remember your favorite concert or play, or that crazy street performer juggling fire while balancing on his head? Of course you do! It was memorable. But why? What was it that made it stick in your mind as something you can almost experience again just by closing your eyes? Bring some of those elements into these events. Be reasonable (and safe), but take some risks. Check out some TED Talks for ideas, like http://www.ted.com/talks/hans_rosling_at_state or http://www.ted.com/talks/derek_sivers_how_to_start_a_movement

The Payoff: In addition to the obvious social benefits, and the fact that you'll get things done that otherwise might have been pushed aside due to "prioritization" (i.e. firefighting), you'll develop your marketing skills. Why is that important? Well, not only will you get better at inventing and promoting more free events, but you'll also get better at soliciting upper management's support for continuous improvement. Think about pitches to the Executive Team like advertisements: the better the ads, the higher the click-through and conversion rates.

CONCLUSION

After trying out these strategies, you'll have formed a couple new (and interesting) teams, started developing a loyal sidekick that drives ideas (and you) forward, and created some memorable events that produced real results.

Think back to the examples of the over-stated job descriptions and elaborate titles that all exist to describe the same person, the one responsible for "doing Lean" or "improving the process." Imagine if the previous paragraph was copied and pasted into your current HR file. It's a decent start, right?

Now imagine adding some of the following to your performance summary, or LinkedIn profile:

Impact you have on your peers

- Leverage their individual **purpose** to build knowledge-sharing relationships for results
- Cleverly teach (without teaching) and train (without training) – they engage willfully
- Encourage and guide unlikely teams to influence up, together, giving them confidence

Impact you generate for the company

- Develop stronger, more capable people that autonomously improve their work
- Turn enthusiastic followers into problem solving leaders
- Translate productivity improvements as cost reductions
(Bonus: management LOVES cost reduction)

3 STRATEGIES FOR LEAN LEADERS

- Engage customers in more proactive conversations instead of reacting to complaints
(Bonus: management HATES customer complaints)
- Amass a solid list of future "project" ideas (Bonus: management LOVES roadmaps)

And,

- Improve Safety, Quality, and Delivery (Huh? Yes, after all that's the whole point!)

All of the other intangible benefits are not the end game. They are the means by which you accomplish the basic, fundamental business improvements that many leaders struggle to do because their plans typically contradict the Lean principles.

- They fight the customer and stand by their features-proposition instead of finding the value-proposition their market really needs.
- They see meetings and ERP (and other flow disrupters) as solutions to production problems, and promote PUSH from the beginning as the only way to get more out at the end.
- Rather than embracing perfection as competition, they play with pricing and benchmarking to learn what others are doing and aim to be just a few points better in order to "win" business.

As a Lean Program Manager or Continuous Improvement Facilitator (or whichever title you've adopted), you can't change the rules of their game. Not without sacrificing your sanity (or possibly your job). Instead, play within the rules but own the snap counts and "audibles." Approach the line of scrimmage as if the only goal is a first down.

You can't do it alone, so apply the strategies outlined above to execute incredible play after incredible play. Before you know it, you'll string together a memorable scoring drive, and put meaningful points on the board.

That's how you'll secure your starting position on the roster and fuel the organization's forward progress. Executives (like team owners) will take notice and be your loudest supporters (mainly because in their minds you're doing it their way).

But you'll know the truth, and that secret is safe.

STRATEGY 1 WORKSHEET

Select strong allies that have teams of their own

! WRITE 1 NAME FOR EACH PERSONALITY TO SEEK OUT, AND 2 POTENTIAL POINTS TO INSERT INTO THEIR PATTERNS (e.g. morning coffee truck, daily team meeting, weekly planning session, etc.)

- HIGH-FIVER: _____
 - PATTERN 1: _____
 - PATTERN 2: _____
- NEW PERSON: _____
 - PATTERN 1: _____
 - PATTERN 2: _____
- REAL BOSS: _____
 - PATTERN 1: _____
 - PATTERN 2: _____

! SELECT 1 NAME / 1 PATTERN AND ASK TO OBSERVE OR JOIN TO START A CONVERSATION ABOUT CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT WITH THEIR TEAM

! RECORD YOUR SHARED VISION OF THE POSSIBILITIES HERE:

- STRATEGIC BUSINESS OBJECTIVE TO FOCUS ON: _____

- PROBLEM THAT NEEDS TO BE SOLVED: _____

- EXPECTED PERFORMANCE IMPROVEMENT: _____

! SCHEDULE THE 1ST TEAM MEETING: DATE _____ TIME _____

STRATEGY 2 WORKSHEET

Find an apprentice

! WRITE 1 NAME FOR EACH PERSONALITY CONNECT WITH, AND 2 IDEAL STATE EXPRESSIONS THEY SHARE WITH YOU (e.g. If only we gave more recognitions for improvements; I wish we used customer returns to drive quality programs; etc.)

- BARRIER BUSTER: _____
 - IDEAL 1: _____
 - IDEAL 2: _____
- WANDERER: _____
 - IDEAL 1: _____
 - IDEAL 2: _____
- IDEA COLLECTOR: _____
 - IDEAL 1: _____
 - IDEAL 2: _____

! WRITE DOWN 1 MAJOR CHANGE/IMPROVEMENT YOU'VE WANTED TO MAKE BUT HAVEN'T DUE TO MENTAL BLOCK, LACK OF ENERGY, OR FAILED ATTEMPTS:

! SELECT AN IDEAL STATE EXPRESSION THAT CLOSELY MATCHES WHAT YOU WROTE ABOVE, AND SET UP TIME TO DISCUSS A COACHING RELATIONSHIP:

- EXPLORE A COMMON GOAL/OBJECTIVE TO FOCUS ON ACCOMPLISHING
- REVIEW THE BASICS OF A3 MANAGEMENT AND PDCA PROCESS
- SET A TARGET DATE FOR IMPLEMENTATION: _____
- SET A STANDING A3 REVIEW FREQUENCY: _____

! ON YOUR OWN, PICK A QUALITY OR SKILL YOUR NEW APPRENTICE HAS THAT YOU WOULD LIKE TO LEARN FOR YOURSELF. ASK HIM OR HER FOR HELP: _____

STRATEGY 3 WORKSHEET

Host “Free Events”

! THIS IS THE FUN PART. TAKE CREATIVE LIBERTIES AND LIST OUT AT LEAST 3 SOCIAL EVENTS OUTSIDE OF WORK WHERE THINGS GOT DONE (e.g. community clean-up events, TEDx, Meet-Ups, after work sports, fund raisers, etc.)

- EVENT 1: _____
 - WHY YOU ATTENDED: _____
- EVENT 2: _____
 - WHY YOU ATTENDED: _____
- EVENT 3: _____
 - WHY YOU ATTENDED: _____

! COME UP WITH 2 OR 3 SIMILAR EVENTS YOU COULD HOST FOR COWORKERS, WITH A SPECIFIC OUTCOME/IMPROVEMENT IN MIND:

- IDEA 1: _____
 - OUTCOME/IMPROVEMENT: _____
- IDEA 2: _____
 - OUTCOME/IMPROVEMENT: _____
- IDEA 3: _____
 - OUTCOME/IMPROVEMENT: _____

! SHOP THE IDEAS AROUND TO A FEW PEOPLE WHO WOULD MOST LIKELY ATTEND, AND PICK THE ONE THE GETS THE MOST “VOTES”.

- SET A DATE: _____

! PROMOTE THE EVENT IN NEWSLETTERS, FLIERS, BULLETINS, ETC. ADVERTISE THE SOCIAL ASPECTS (“FUN” STUFF) AND ALSO THE SPECIFIC CHANGE OR IMPROVEMENT YOU’RE EXPECTING.

! TREAT THIS LIKE AN EXPERIMENT. THE MORE YOU DO, THE BETTER YOU’LL GET AT DOING IT. KEEP IT SIMPLE UNTIL YOU BUILD A STEADY FOLLOWING.