Are You a Lean Leader?

By Kevin McManus

Over the past few years, we have seen the application of lean thinking and lean tools begin to shift away from the production lines, where their use has achieved lots of success in many organizations. As I watch these methodologies being applied in office settings such as call centers and accounting departments, I can only wonder when we as leaders are going to turn these tools on ourselves with the same zeal. Most leaders do a pretty good job of talking about the need to be lean, and approving training dollars for learning about lean tools, but **are these same leaders trying to make their own leadership systems as lean as they could be?**

As I have said before, all organizations are made up of people and processes, no matter what service or product they exist to provide. In turn, if we truly want to 'walk the talk" as lean leaders, we need to make sure that the people and processes we are personally responsible for each day are as lean as they can be. This includes, by the way, the processes that the leader you see each day in the mirror affects, even if you are only an informal leader in your company.

My experiences have shown me time and again how an organization's leadership system is one of the most important systems in any business, school, hospital, government, or volunteer group. There are good reasons why leadership is the first of seven categories, and represents the most points, in the Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award criteria. If we looked at the types of business books that have been written over time, we would probably find that leadership books dominate that landscape as well. Still, I personally wonder if our leadership systems, and in turn our leaders, have really improved to a significant degree over that same time. **Are our leaders getting leaner along with their organizations?**

Some would argue that leadership is difficult to measure. Others would say that we are already measuring our leaders through the use of monthly and quarterly reports, daily stock performance, and annual profit numbers. I would argue that while we can get a very general view of a leadership team's effectiveness, and degree of leanness, by looking at these types of numbers, we are missing out on opportunities to make this key system even more effective. If we aren't content with measuring a production line's effectiveness by looking only at its daily output, then we should not settle for using only macro measures when it comes to assessing leadership process performance.

I have learned that there are three main types of processes that leaders use on a daily basis – decision making, personal behavior, and meetings – that could be made much leaner. Through experience, networking, and a lot of personal thought, I have also come to believe that we can measure the effectiveness of individual leaders in these three areas on a regular basis. If the thought of measuring your own performance on a daily basis, or worse yet, having someone else measure your performance each day, bothers you, then you might want to reflect on what you are asking other people on your team to do each day. Isn't only fair that your performance is studied with as much scrutiny as others on your team are? Is there some reason why you don't need to monitored in this manner, even though others do?

Individual leaders spend time and money each day executing a common set of processes, just as front line employees do. Giving a person a certain title in a company does not make them any more or less trustworthy or excuse them from the responsibility of making sure that the time and money they personally spend is used wisely. Consider the variety of formal and informal meetings that leaders conduct or participate in each day. Meetings represent the primary way in which leadership time, and in turn money, is spent each day, but have we gotten appreciably better at getting the results we desire from a given meeting in the least amount of time possible for all

involved? How lean are the meetings that are conducted in your organization? Can you answer this question in a manner that is based on actual results, or are you merely speculating? If you are relying mostly on opinion, instead of fact, to gauge the effectiveness of one of the most time intensive processes (meetings) in your company, how can you expect others to measure every second of their job?

I feel we would save a lot of money by making our meetings leaner, but we would still be neglecting the two other key leadership processes – decision making and personal behavior. I am not saying that it is easy to measure these types of processes, and in turn make them leaner over time, but I do know we can make some very supportive statements to our people by at least attempting to trend the performance of these two process types. Think about it – don't your leaders do the same things day in and day out? Do they measure their performance often enough to see a performance improvement trend?

For example, I have seen high performing companies use a leadership index as part of their employee survey process each year to measure and trend the quality of both individual leadership behaviors and decision making effectiveness. By choosing to measure themselves, and attempting to improve these results over time, these leaders are making a statement about what is important. They are also demonstrating their personal commitment to a fact-based approach to process improvement.

Managers and supervisors are harder to measure in terms of process excellence. They move around a lot during the day, and a lot of the time, they aren't even in the building. Their work does not seem to be as process oriented as the tasks on an assembly line, but if we pull back and look at these jobs from a greater distance, we can see the patterns of behavior, and in turn, the processes that need to be made leaner. Imagine the power that would come from a leader sharing their personal lean improvement results with their people at the next employee meeting, instead of simply attempting to explain why 'we all need to get leaner'.

If you do the math, you will find that we have yet to measure, analyze, and begin to make lean some of the key processes that we spend a lot of time and money on each day in our organizations. A given process should not be ignored just because it is difficult to measure. Would your company benefit from having leaner meetings, more effective and fact-based decision making processes, and a leaner approach to developing more effective leadership behaviors? The tools for improving these processes are out there – companies are using them right now. In many cases, all we have to do is make a choice to measure ourselves just as we measure others. Are you a lean leader?

About Kevin McManus

Kevin McManus is a performance improvement coach for Great Systems! and an international trainer for the TapRooT root cause analysis process. During his twenty six years in the business world, he has served as an Industrial Engineer, Training Manager, Production Manager, Plant Manager, and Director of Quality.   He holds an undergraduate degree in Industrial Engineering and an MBA. Kevin has been a member of IIE for more than twenty-five years, and has served as Senior VP of Continuing Education on the IIE Board of Trustees. He has served as an Examiner and Senior Examiner for the Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award for eight years. Kevin also writes the monthly performance improvement column for Industrial Engineer magazine, and he has published a book entitled "You Can't Win Indy in an Edsel - How to Develop a High Performance Work Culture."

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