RANT
Really Opinionated People

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Lean Manufacturing

IN ORDER TO IMPLEMENT THIS PROCESS, STICK TO THE BASICS

LEAN MANUFACTURING SEEMS to be all the rage these days. Although it's an ideal opportunity to remove waste and make an organization more efficient, there is a downside to all the hype. The bandwagon aspect that afflicts many new devotees of the practice leads them to believe they can pick and choose the lean tools to implement, only to be disappointed when those big results don't materialize.

Here's a typical scenario: A company sends a group of employees to a lean seminar. They return pumped up, arms weighted down with binders full of PowerPoint slides, and eager to apply what they have learned. In their enthusiasm, they descend upon their charges, changing procedures, moving machinery and re-designing entire departments in record time. When the smoke clears, the problems they set out to solve are still there, more troublesome than ever.

Lean is not a goose you coax into laying the golden egg. Rather, it is a hierarchy of Kaizen ("improvement") fundamentals that must be followed purposely and methodically if it is to bring about the results you seek. These steps include observation of a process, standardization of work, the flow of product in and out of an area, equipment/resources and department layout. Attempt to bypass these steps or do one before the other and your lean efforts will fail before they've had a chance to take root.

Observation means looking at an operation the way it is done today. Not as we would like to see it, or as someone suggests we should see it. We can't begin to make meaningful change until we understand what the current practice is regarding a process or set of tasks. So, the first effort should be geared to watching all elements of a particular job and should include as many people as possible who are involved in the task under observation.

After the observation phase, the next step is standardization of the work. What is the best practice for the work you have observed? If there are several operators running the same type of machine, they should each contribute to this phase. One may have a shortcut for one task, another, a trick to tweak the machine just right, and yet another, a way to eliminate a step. At the end of the exercise all should agree on the best way to accomplish the job and ensure everyone is trained on these new procedures.

STICKING TO THE BASICS FROM THE VERY BEGINNING WILL PUT YOU ON TRACK.

With the basics done, the team can now focus on other aspects of lean. This includes examining the flow of product in and out of an area; determining if there are enough resources, including personnel and equipment, to meet customer demand; changing the layout of a particular area to create efficient work cells where all participants can accomplish their work in a smooth and efficient manner.

There are many more parts to the Lean Manufacturing puzzle, and it can take years to get all the pieces to fit right for your organization. But, sticking to the basics from the very beginning, giving you and your team time to absorb the concepts and put them into practice in a logical way, will put you and your organization on a winning track.

Be patient, shoot for the "small" victories and stay with it. ■

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