

## How to Avoid the 5 Biggest Lean Pitfalls

September 1, 2006

### ARTICLE TOOLS

 Email  Print  Reprints  Share

Lean success takes more than doing things right. "It is also about avoiding pitfalls that can lead to failure," says Jamie Flinchbaugh, partner in the Lean Learning Center (Novi, MI) and author of ASSEMBLY magazine's monthly "Leading Lean" column. "Leaders must always be on the lookout for signs of lean failure, which can occur at any point in the lean transformation process."

Flinchbaugh will be participating in the *Lean Barrier Busting* session at this year's Assembly Technology Expo in Rosemont, IL. The 3-hour session on Tuesday, Sept. 26, is organized by ASSEMBLY and will feature insights on several lean manufacturing success stories. According to Flinchbaugh, there are five common lean pitfalls:

- Believing lean is *only* about manufacturing.
- Allowing the lean department to lead lean initiatives.
- Confusing "activity" with "productivity."
- Focusing on "event lean," which prevents a company from becoming genuinely lean.
- Believing "hare lean" will beat "tortoise lean."

A chief concern about Pitfall No. 1 is that companies are not always focused on the right problems. "There seems to be three dominant reasons why people get stuck in the lean-equals-manufacturing mindset," says Flinchbaugh.

"The first is that there is an abundance of media, books and training focused on 'lean manufacturing,'" explains Flinchbaugh. "This has been perpetuated to such an extent that people wonder whether lean assembly will work in a machine shop. But, the machine shop is precisely where Toyota's Taiichi Ohno conducted his first experiments and refined lean transformation."

A second reason why people equate lean with manufacturing is that manufacturing is the most visible and measurable part of an organization. "It is easy to measure manufacturing," says Flinchbaugh. "While often the wrong things are measured, every manufacturing manager has at least a dozen numbers he or she can recite to explain process performance. A manufacturing plant may make improvements to increase productivity, but that does not necessarily mean its controller has improved the efficiency of closing the company's books."

The third reason for this mindset is because most companies start their lean transformation on the plant floor, so all other functions immediately associate lean with manufacturing. "Other functional leaders see manufacturing's efforts to break lean out of manufacturing as an attempt to encroach on their territory," notes Flinchbaugh. He recalls one large company that changed the wording on training materials used outside of manufacturing so that it would not appear to be manufacturing-based.

"When manufacturing does start to convince those outside of manufacturing that lean applies to them, it often takes the wrong approach, further complicating matters," warns Flinchbaugh. "The use of 'lean manufacturing in finance' does not do anything to break down the wall. As lean is trained and communicated, the focus should not be just on manufacturing tools, such as andon cords and kanban cards. Lean rules and principles should be presented as the foundation that will apply to any process."

To learn more about the other four common lean pitfalls, be sure to attend the *Lean Barrier Busting* session at the 2006 Assembly Technology Expo. In addition to Flinchbaugh, the 3-hour session on

Tuesday, Sept. 26, from 10 a.m. to 1 p.m., also features Joe Blanck, vice president of operations, strategy and manufacturing excellence at Schneider Electric (Palatine, IL); Tim Corcoran, vice president of ZF North America (Vernon Hills, IL); and Jim Kass, director of operations at Allen-Edmonds Shoe Corp. (Port Washington, WI). The event will include a panel discussion and Q&A session.

Assembly Technology Expo is the world's largest trade show for assembly tools and technology. It is attended by more than 12,000 manufacturing engineers, design engineers and plant managers from a wide variety of industries, including aerospace, appliance, automotive, consumer goods, electronics, industrial machinery, medical devices and telecommunications. ASSEMBLY is the official sponsor of the annual event. To register for the *Lean Barrier Busting* session or find out more information about Assembly Technology Expo, click [www.atexpo.com](http://www.atexpo.com).

# Avoiding Lean pitfalls

Lean efforts do fail sometimes. This is usually due to lack of planning, and attempts to master Lean tools without first developing an overall strategy for the business.

## The most common pitfalls

The most common pitfalls to be avoided when implementing Lean include:

- believing that "your industry is too different to use these techniques"
- lack of Lean leadership
- not educating the entire work force
- not having a clearly identified need and reason for change
- not having a process-owner of the change effort
- not having backing and continuous commitment from top management
- not involving the people who will actually do the work
- not understanding why you need to make these changes

## Barriers to Lean

Many organizations encounter some of these typical barriers to Lean:

- Belief that "our company is different", and that Lean does not really apply to "our company".
- Inability of personnel to "get it"! They view the Lean transformation as just another of the never-ending stream of new business improvement ideas or just another "flavor of the month" because the organization did not sustain the Lean effort for a long enough period of time.
- Lack of Lean infrastructure. For example, the lack of a Lean champion who has clear objectives and resources.
- Lack of a clear link to the business' strategic goals.
- Firms take a piecemeal approach to implementing the principles of Lean. Partial efforts often fail.
- Resistance to Lean transformation. Some people either do not understand Lean, or don't want to make the changes required. Employees may need to be moved to new positions where they do not jeopardize the Lean process.
- Lack of employee education can cause Lean efforts to fail. The implementation of Lean requires a change of mind and heart of every employee.
- Lack of involvement by the majority of employees, both shop floor and office.
- Lack of understanding, and poor training, for the implementation of Lean. Teams of qualified employees must be selected and trained to design, develop, and deploy the Lean program.

- Team interaction is critical to the success of the Lean effort, and teams must be selected to ensure good cooperation. Lack of implementation know-how makes up 25% of obstacles to Lean.
- Lack of long-term serious management commitment to Lean often results in a "back to business as usual" syndrome. Management does not "walk the talk". Backsliding makes up 36% of obstacles to Lean.