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Finding your inner factory

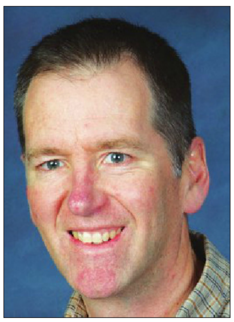
During initial discussions with organizational leaders, I occasionally get the question, "Have you ever worked in the (fill in the blank) field before?"

I explain my experience that, while various industries have their unique vocabularies and funding models, they all have basically the same goal: To provide valued products/services with minimal waste in order to maximize profits or to stretch limited funding. The need to expertly identify and reduce waste is universal across industries. So are the tools used and, more importantly, the cultural aspects required for successfully accomplishing that.

While Lean methodologies has is origins in the auto industry almost 70 years ago, its philosophy has permeated almost all walks of life, including healthcare, retail, services, and government. So today it is rather unusual for me to encounter a team that cannot make the natural extension of Lean philosophies to their situation.

Still, occasionally I run into a group that patiently explains to me the litany of reasons why these proven principles don't apply to their work. Invariably someone will utter the two deadly words … "We're different."

I have to confess that, at this point, I amuse myself by imagining a conversation between Mr./Ms.



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Exception as a teenager and their parent.

Parent: Aren't you going to the dance at the high school tonight?

Mr./Ms. Exception: Nah, I have to catch up on some homework.

Parent: But all the other kids are going!

Mr./Ms. Exception: Gosh Mom, if all the other kids jumped off a bridge, would you want me to?

Parent (mumbling): Perhaps if it made you more normal.

Mr./Ms. Exception: I'm different.

Successful non-manufacturing Lean applications are able to recognize their "factory." According to Ken Miller, author of We Don't Make Widgets, this starts by identifying the widgets produced.

While Miller's book was written for governments, it applies to any non-manufacturing organization interested in improving. Miller explains that widgets are things, not activities. One may perform accounting, but examples of their widgets might be a completed and filed tax form, an end-of-month cash flow statement, or a payroll check. As such, widgets can be counted.

And widgets are specific. Just as a manufacturing business may make many different models of a product, our accountant may have numerous unique tax forms that are completed while serving a customer.

Once one can see their widgets, they can begin to identify the series of process steps required to produce each unique widget, just as a manufacturing firm defines its factory. Overcoming this hurdle, they open the door to decades of lessons learned within manufacturing.

Manufacturing-type questions can start to be asked?

Is each process step value-added?

Where do defects occur?

How long does each step take?

Where does backlog (i.e., inventory) accumulate?

Now an organization is in a position to get serious about improvement. Until then, they will almost certainly remain complacently stuck with the status quo. In today's competitive world, that truly is a unique — and dangerous — place to be.

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