

Things are getting a little better each day



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It is the ultimate cliché. Athletes and CEOs state it all the time, “We just need to get a little better each day.”

Lean gurus refer to it as Managing for Daily Improvement, but most “experts” offer little practical advice as to how one goes about creating a workplace where every employee is continually making incremental improvements ... a truly Lean culture.

So I was intrigued to listen to Paul A. Akers at the Iowa Lean Consortium’s Fall Conference discuss how he created such an environment. Akers is the founder and president of FastCap LLC (www.fastcap.com), a successful product development company located in Washington state. Akers also is a world-renowned Lean enthusiast, practicing its principles both in the management of his company and in his personal life. His book, “2 Second Lean” is in its third edition.

In order to fully appreciate Akers’ lessons, I had a hurdle to overcome. Akers is a Lean “celebrity” and I have a natural aversion to celebrities. I would rather have lunch with my physician, Dr. Matt, than Dr. Oz or Dr. Phil.

I cynically listened as Akers boiled down FastCap’s success into three pillars.

The first is to teach people to see waste. In addition to daily, one-minute reminders on the Eight Forms of Waste, Akers continually encourages folks to identify, “What bugs you?” He reasons that behind every irritant is waste.

The second pillar is to schedule time each day for employees to make improvements. FastCap dedicates the first hour of each workday to making improvements and a company-wide meeting. One hour — every day! That’s really managing for daily improvement, not simply wishing for it.

The final pillar is sharing the success stories. FastCap encourages employees to make short “Before” and “After” videos on their cellphones documenting their improvements. These are shared during the daily meeting. It’s an opportunity to recognize the improv-

ers and provide ideas to others.

“That’s it?” I wondered. It seems too simple. I concluded that this is another example of where simple doesn’t equate to easy.

It’s not earth-shattering that, if people are expected to make improvements, time has to be set aside for them to do it. It’s quite another thing to schedule time away from normal activities, to provide training so employees know what to do and to have accountability processes in place to ensure people are effectively making use of that time.

I decided to put the new information to the test. Beginning with the new year, I’ve been trying to implement an improvement each day. So far, I’ve been successful more than 70 percent of the time. Here’s what I’ve learned so far:

- “What bugs you?” is a powerful question. More than 50 percent of my improvements were identified by simply being tuned into personal peeves.

- Improvements come in all sizes. Many are quite small (e.g., unsubscribing from a nuisance email, converting a regular bill payment to automatic withdrawal or creating a simple Excel template for tracking personal mileage). A few have been big and expensive (e.g., cataract surgery). All make my job and/or life better.

- Large improvements can be broken down into smaller projects to fit the scheduled improvement time. 5S the garage can become 5S the workbench, 5S the storage rack, 5S the east wall, etc.

- It’s important to keep a list of potential improvements at the ready. Great ideas evaporate when left to memory.

Getting a little better each day is possible, but it requires significant behavior change beginning with management. Without that commitment, all we’re really signing up for is more random variation of good days and bad days. Nothing changes, until something changes.

RICK SAYS

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Debra Morris

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