

Culture trumps tools every time

I'm frequently asked, especially by prospective clients, on the relative importance of tools and culture to a successful Lean implementation. This is a topic of an ongoing debate throughout the many facets of business (manufacturing, health care, finance, government) that are using Lean to improve.



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As a Lean practitioner, it's also something I think about frequently. My answer has been steadily evolving.

Perhaps a decade ago, I would have declared tools and culture as equal partners in ensuring success. Over time, my assess-

ment of that 50-50 relationship has moved through 80 percent culture, 20 percent tools and today stands at 90-10 culture. Ask me again in the near future and I wouldn't be surprised to hear myself saying that Lean success is 99 percent dependent on a healthy culture.

That's unfortunate, because attaining tools is a relatively straightforward task. But it also explains why the vast majority of Lean initiatives fail to realize hoped-for results.

Lean isn't unique in that respect. It's just the way life works. If simply buying weight loss pills and the amazing abs master got the job done, we'd all look like Brad Pitt or Angelina Jolie.

Perhaps the best analogy I can give as to the relative importance of culture and tools involves fish-

ing (something else that I've been thinking about frequently this summer).

No matter how much is invested in high-tech fishing poles, line and shiny lures (all great tools), disappointing results are assured if one is casting into a cesspool (lousy culture). On the other hand, it's surprising what can be used to catch fish when fishing a well-managed lake and sitting on top of a school of hungry lunkers.

This explains why choosing the right consultant is so important. There are a lot of very capable tools salespersons out there. But, as mentioned previously, tools are the easy part.

Transforming the mindset of your organization so that management and employees will work together to embrace those tools is an entirely different matter. That's the tough part because it almost always involves behavioral change, starting with management.

The right consultant possesses a proven track record for managing the critical relationship with management. That includes both the ability to diagnose the current culture, the skill to prescribe actions to improve it, and the fortitude to hold management accountable for changing.

The latter has no doubt led to the dismissal of some good consultants over the years. But don't worry about them. They were almost certainly relieved to be free of a no-win situation. Because they were successful, they likely had a nice backlog of work awaiting them.

And since they were disciplined Lean practitioners, they almost certainly tweaked their future client selection process to flag out management teams that were only interested in purchasing tools.



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CORRECTION

Sentences repeated in August article

Due to an editing error, two sentences were inadvertently repeated in the Heather Stahl column head-

lined "Text banking is quick, easy," on pages 11 and 12 of the August Cedar Valley Business Monthly.