

Designing the “RUBBER” Production Environment

Funny thing about customers, they seldom seem to place orders on our enterprise that supports level loading or the kind of mix model that our Value Streams seem to like. Of course we employ a suite of tools to absorb that erratic demand, such as Lean, Hyjunkia, one piece flow etc. However several years ago Brian Clements who was then the VP of Manufacturing at Steelcase Canada came up with a very simple concept the “Rubber Factory”.

The Rubber Factory allows you to reallocate resources with a structured methodology through pre-planning which results in fewer disturbances to flow. Think of this methodology like the pre-planning practice that many organizations use for emergency preparedness.

Brian took the concept of Lean to a whole new level, he truly embraced the notion that there are no titles in a Lean Enterprise and that every employee needs to focus on supporting the customer from a customer’s perspective.

Here is what Brian in essence did. First he cross trained every employee in the organization to be able to perform a value add task in the Value Stream. Then like the design of a modern HVAC system that shuts down certain operations to control energy costs, Brian designed an employee reallocation model that woke based on incoming customer demand for the day

If incoming demand exceeded the norm for the day, the organization would reallocate the engineers to work on the lines, if this was not enough then the mechanics would be reassigned and added to the work force ... this would continue throughout the organization including the use of the sales force and even the President. The only person not deployed to the factory floor was the receptionist who still maintained the voice to the customer for that day.

There was a lot of power in this model that went beyond supporting the customer. It completely blurred the lines between management and the team members on the floor. In many cases it allowed the technical disciplines within the organization to spend an extended period of time working and observing a specific operation. We are traditionally very good at jumping into a problem area and then invoking a solution ... but how often do we spend time in a seemingly well run operation to see how we can make it better, safer or simpler?

Another company, took it a step further and closed their maintenance department and included the Mill wrights as bona-fide team members and was amazed with the results. These Mill Wrights were used to identify and implement solutions. As they worked on specific operations that naturally began to implement simple solutions that made work for the Team Members safer and in many cases simpler.

The concept of Rubber Factory also supports another great Principal within the Toyota Production System, asking employees To work for a period of time in a non traditional role. This forces The employee to work using out-side eyes stimulating Suggestions for improvement.

Take some time to design your “Rubber Factory” and make sure you run the model at least 3 times per year ... it is fun, supports erratic customer demand, breaks down barriers and gives people an additional opportunity to see operations up close and personal.

Where Lean Thoughts can become Reality

“Unless you try to do something beyond what you have already mastered, you will never grow.”

Ronald. E. Osborn

Great Ideas for Making Idea-Prone Companies

What I like about the following article, is this is something to consider during your Value Stream Mapping workshops. One of the constant feed-back comments I receive from or employees after a participating in a VSM Workshop is that they have never taken the time to observe the waste they experience every day in the work-place. Conducting a VSM forces you to sit back to observe, reflect and generate ideas to enhance a process, instead of focusing on getting your 100 tons of coal out each day. Think about it ...

Give yourself and your employee's time to think of ideas. While it can seem that there is never enough time to get everything done and deadlines are always looming, you can't afford not to take the time to come up with new ideas. Allow even just a few minutes every day to discover what your customers or employees are thinking and what problems or frustrations they may be experiencing. Ask your employees what they are working on, where there may be problems, and what ideas they have for solving them.

Positively reinforce ideas—avoid the automatic no. As discussed earlier don't rush to judge ideas. It's the process of coming up with ideas that need to be reinforced, not whether the idea is good or not. Evaluation can come later.

Look to unlikely sources of opportunities. You never know where creativity an innovation will emerge. Think beyond your age group, socioeconomic status, and education.

Get a room with a view. Give your employees—and yourself—varied experiences. Get away from the office, go visit customers, allow employees to learn one another's jobs, and so on. It enables people to get a different perspective, and it is when we can change our routine that break-through ideas often can be discovered. An innovative company does not automatically develop out of an innovative business idea. **You have to deliberately set your expectations and communicate them to your employees.** Remember that recognition is fuel—it fans the fires of creativity and helps your business reach potentials that you may never have anticipated. Einstein said, "Creativity is contagious... pass it on." As the business owner, you are in a unique position to make sure that people's brains don't stop at your company's door. .

Source: Katz, Jerome A., & Green, Richard P. "Entrepreneurial Small Business"

Change Begins With The Right Vision -- and the Right Communication.... *So how to select change agents.*

Here are some of the signs you might be a change agent.

- You love taking out the garbage: all that waste!
- Your children know the difference between Operation Cycle Time and Shop Lead Time.
- Your garage is 5-S'ed with labels and shadow boards.
- You load the dishwasher using the Theory of Constraints, and prefer to load small batches for a mathematical reason.
- You refer to your ex-spouse as "Non-Value Added / Corrected"
- You and your children decorate cupcakes using single piece flow.
- You ask your husband what work center he is in when he sits in the recliner, with the remote control in his hand, watching the football game. You ask him how many target hours he has for that work center, because the dishwasher work center is next for him, and it must be loaded using the theory of constraints.
- You buy bread and milk in accordance to a takt rate. You know the ex-wife never did figure out that takt rate.
- Your progress using 'Weight Watchers' diet is plotted in Excel and hung on your bathroom wall. The graph has a baseline, and a goal. When you reach your goal, you establish upper control limits on the chart. The chart is mounted directly above the scale in the bathroom as a visual reminder for you to weigh in each morning.
- You keep two egg crates in the fridge. The forward one is the one in use. When that one is empty, you bring the back one forward, and use the empty crate as a visual reminder to buy more eggs.

Our thanks to Gary Lister for these insights.

Lean Thoughts