

Are you Leading Lean?

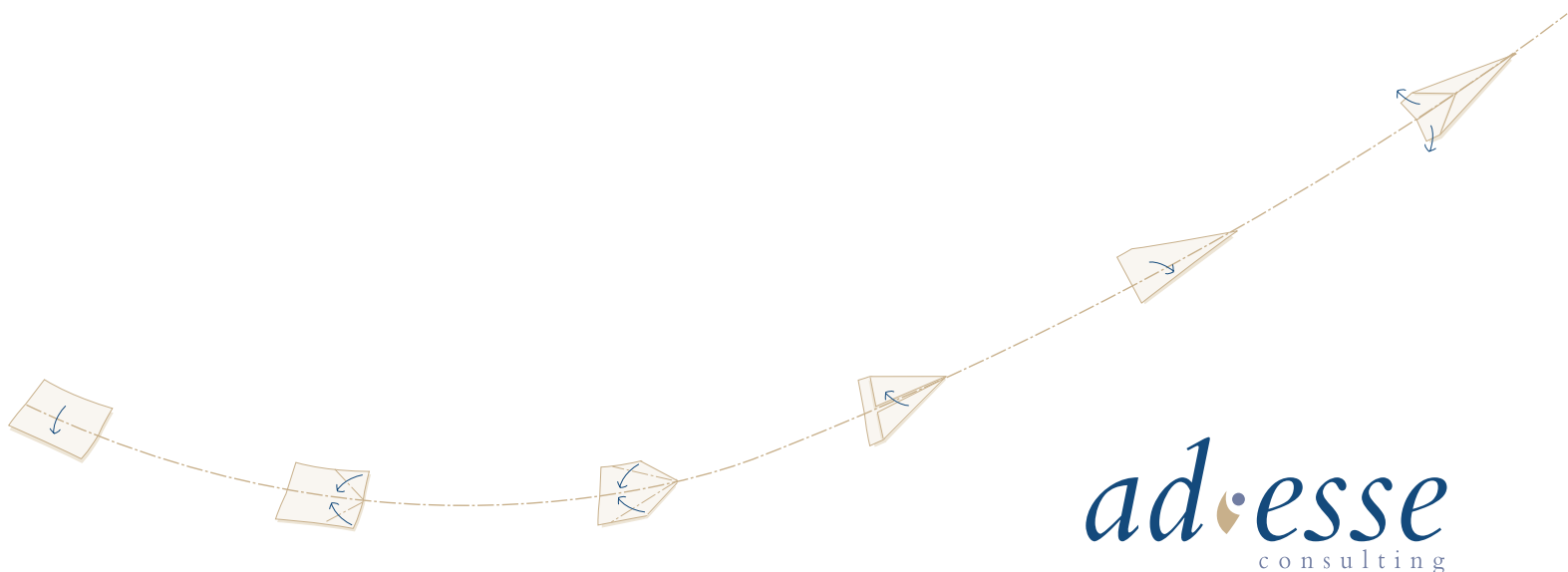
Lean philosophy and tools have been around for some years now. Successfully transferred from manufacturing to services, Lean has yielded massive savings and transformed the way in which organisations work. Whilst not everyone knows about lean, amongst those who do, there are few critics. It is only recently however that the lean community has begun to acknowledge that the 'full potential' and 'sustainability' of lean may rely on competence beyond its basic philosophy and tools.

Migrating any organisation, department or function to lean inevitably creates the following: challenge and change. Lean requires us to think differently and behave differently. We have to do different things in different ways. For many of us the new ways are akin to how we always wanted to work, but nonetheless we remain challenged. Lean forces us to examine minutely how we currently do things and often discard well-known and comfortable practices. Those practices may be ones we have personally designed and implemented and that we own.

Challenge and change can cause hugely destructive and disruptive environments if not managed, with individual reactions ranging from mild discomfort, through resistance, and at worst fear and dysfunction.

If lean is to be successful it needs to be led, with leaders considering the organisational impact of proposed changes and applying their leadership competence accordingly.

So, are we just talking about the various competences of tried and tested 'good' leadership? In our experience of working with leaders moving towards lean cultures, we believe it's something more – its lean leadership. Lean leadership is something different, comprising a unique blend of leadership competences applied situationally, and which sorts the 'sustainably excellent' from the 'good for now'.



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Let us look at the competencies we thinking of here for leading lean.

CHARACTERISTICS OF THE LEAN LEADER

Perhaps it is understood that anyone leading lean must have a knowledge and fundamental commitment to the philosophy of lean and its tools. Anyone can acquire the knowledge, but it is the translation into reality of fundamental commitment that is the first task of leading lean, for the leader must embody lean, role modelling lean behaviour at every turn, and doing so consistently. If a leader has personal insight and is self-reflective, then he or she will be much more likely and able to identify what employees need to move towards lean, and be better equipped to provide it. Unfortunately we have witnessed organisations who believe they are genuinely committed to implementing lean, whose leaders then go on to behave in a way that actually makes either it's implementation or sustainability difficult.

CREATE THE RIGHT ENVIRONMENT

Secondly, leaders must create the right environment for lean to be introduced, and for it to become 'business as usual'. This will involve being able to manage change, and requires leaders to have a full understanding of the current culture, and what must be changed to create a lean culture. This aspect of introducing lean can then become part of an overall lean 'road map, at the planning stage, something that is sometimes lacking when organisations introduce lean. The emphasis too often rests on machinery, or easily measurable aspects of processes, without considering just what will be involved in sustaining any 'obvious' or rapid change. Leaders at the top must lead cultural change management as it represents a 'collective' commitment and planning aspect of leading lean. In focussing on the practical matters, many organisations fail to recognise the importance of inspiring and influencing their people to work in different ways, relying on the unquestionable logic of lean itself. Whilst lean as a concept and set of tools lean is undoubtedly logical, people are not. People have emotions, and will react variously and not always positively to change, and since lean can often constitute radical change, people may react radically!

UNDERSTANDING PEOPLE

Thirdly, and at a local level, the leader must understand the people within the organisation to create successful team and personal change. This means knowing how people are individually motivated, and how they behave in teams. It allows leaders to identify precisely how to lead their people through change, encouraging them to challenge the way in which they work positively, and to confront issues that have prevented effectiveness and efficiency in the past.

As Russell Taylor, Lean Project Manager for Gurit UK, a leading resin composite maker based on the Isle of Wight observes:

'It's about clear communication of what you're trying to achieve, and sharing with each and every member of staff, just what your expectations are. You need to show people what's happening and what can be improved within your processes, and you have to keep doing this consistently.'

The final aspect of leading lean is when the concepts of lean are transferred in to leadership itself. How many leaders:

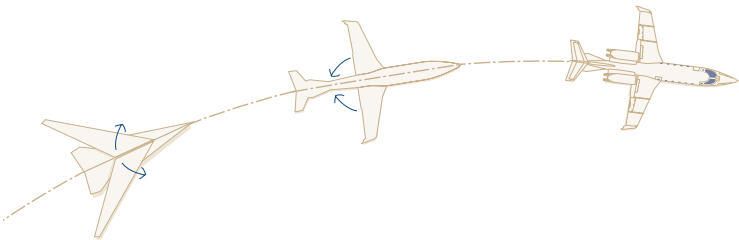
- Examine their own leadership behaviour for its effectiveness?
- Use metrics on which to base their judgement?
- Seek out best practice leadership approaches?
- Willingly change leadership behaviour and management practices to strip out waste in their approaches and become more effective
- Regard appropriate leadership as a means of making their people more effective more swiftly?
- Align their leadership behaviour with what external customers want?
- Work cohesively with other leaders in the organisation?

As Robert Half who founded Robert Half Inc, an international staffing agency in 1948, said:

'Delegating work works, provided the one delegating works, too.'

Do you work as a lean leader?

If you want to know more about becoming a lean leader and maximising your lean approach, contact Beverley MacIntyre at Ad Esse or directly on 07843 306604.



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