

The Work of Management

When looking at a value stream, lean thinkers have the useful habit of asking, “What is the work to be done?” That is, which of the many activities occurring actually create value for the customer? And which steps are waste that can be eliminated? But I find that we rarely look at the process of management in organizations in the same way, asking of managers, “What is the management work to be done?” That is, what are the value-creating activities of the managers who oversee the value streams? It is only by being clear about which activities create value that we can eliminate the wasted efforts of managers.

What is the work of management? What value do managers actually create? My answer, informed by insights from John Shook, is that managers create value—that is, they do useful work—through four types of actions:

- *Gaining agreement on the few important things the organization needs to do.* This means focusing on how the organization can dramatically improve its ability to create more value, and the right type of value, with less time, effort, investment, errors, etc. Gaining agreement is predominantly the work of senior managers, using the lean management tool of strategy deployment. (But please note that the top managers don’t decide in isolation about the few important things. Rather, they gain true agreement through catch-ball dialogue with different levels of the organization about problems and opportunities.)
- *Deploying the few important initiatives selected by strategy deployment, solving problems as they arise, and evaluating proposals from lower levels of the organization.* This is predominantly the work of middle managers, using the lean management tool of A3 analysis that puts plan-do-check-act cycles into an organizational and customer context.

- *Stabilizing the organization.* This means making every step in every process capable, available, adequate, and flexible so the value stream can flow smoothly from end to end and improvements can be sustained. This is predominantly the work of front-line managers, using the lean management tools of standardized work with standardized management and kaizen.
- *Creating the next generation of lean managers.* This is the work—perhaps the most important work—of every manager at every level, using the lean management tool of A3 analysis. New lean managers can only be created in intense dialogue between mentors and problem owners through many cycles of gemba learning.

If this is the work of management, how does my list compare with what managers actually do every day? In my experience, there is hardly any overlap. Most managers I observe spend most of their time with incidental work—box-checking, meetings that reach no actionable conclusions, report writing, personnel reviews that don't develop personnel, etc. And in the time left over they do rework. By the latter I mean the firefighting to get things back on course as processes malfunction. Most managers seem to believe that this is their “real” work and their highest value to their organization.

I see the gap between the true work of management and the things managers actually do as the muda of management, a vast reservoir of wasted effort and lost opportunities that we all need to address. Removing this muda is one of the greatest challenges facing our movement in the years immediately ahead.

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