

Introduction

As president of LeanCor LLC and a committed lean practitioner, I have the pleasure of working with many organizations on their lean journeys. When businesses begin their journeys, the most important step is to educate the entire organization on the fundamentals of lean thinking. That is the purpose of this book. This book is a simple and fun approach to the key concepts and tools that support the lean enterprise.

For some time, I searched for an analogy that would best illustrate lean concepts. The analogy that forms this narrative was revealed to me during a visit to my youngest daughter's first grade classroom. It was all there.

We do not need to overcomplicate lean principles. Successful lean journeys are achieved by organizations that understand that the complexity of lean is in its simplicity: to have a plan, do the plan, check the plan, and then adjust to improve upon the plan. Yet we continue to ask: why are lean principles so difficult for organizations to understand and to execute effectively?

From my experience, I have concluded that the single most important aspect of sustained lean success and operational excellence is to understand this is a way of thinking. Some of you may read this book and believe it describes a set of tools to be used to eliminate waste in work processes. While the narrative does introduce what are known as lean tools, the tools themselves are not the end game. What is useful about a tool if you don't understand the principle and value it brings?

Lean tools were developed to solve specific organizational problems. Each lean tool supports a solution for a particular business problem. Yet companies attempt to implement lean tools without clearly understanding what problems they are trying to solve! Which

begs the question of why we would want to solve problems in the first place. The reason is to make the organization stronger. Make no mistake, lean is about serving our customers better, increasing revenues, and reducing costs. While the term “lean journey” has now taken on almost philosophical connotations, let us not forget this is about improving the business. This is about results.

Organizations struggle with their lean journeys because they focus only on lean tools and do not spend enough time thinking about and understanding lean principles. For example, is one-piece flow a tool for inventory reduction or is it a fundamental way of thinking that shows us the way to ignore economies of scale and begin focusing on problem identification and waste elimination?

Lean is not about tools, it is about thinking. Every single member of the organization needs to come to work and think about a better way to get things done. We need to think about our work, we need to experiment with new ideas, and we need to learn from these experiments. This is the lean way. Tools are about how, but thinking is about why! Without knowing why you would implement lean, the how will never be sustained.

The following story has two components. First, there is the fact-inspired but fictional narrative of my time with Abbey in her first grade class. This is about spending time doing the right things and having your eyes open to see what is going on in your environment.

Second, each chapter ends with a summary from Orlo the Wise Old Owl. I have a personal attachment to Orlo, as he is named after my grandfather (actually spelled Orloe, which is also my middle name). Orlo also represents the side of us that knows what we need to do to improve. With all certainty, the seeds to fix organizational problems already rest inside the organization. We simply need to

allow employees to cultivate those seeds. When we create the environment of continuous improvement and continuous learning, that is what we call a lean enterprise. Orlo helps us to understand how we can accomplish the task of creating a lean enterprise.

To the reader, I thank you for your time. My hope is that time spent with these story characters is value-added to your day. But beware! You too may fall into the same trap I did. Once the lean bug has bitten, you are unable to function in society without looking for process waste and ideas for improvement. This can be a curse.

Personally, I do try to turn it off, but when that is impossible, I listen to Orlo the Wise Old Owl, a voice in my head. I suppose if one is forced to hear a little (and at times annoying) voice, it could be worse than listening to Orlo.

Enjoy the book, and, as my friend Sue Reynard would say, do what your spirit calls you to do.

Robert O. Martichenko
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