The Role of the Pilot Project in Effective Organizational Change

By Louis English

Pilot projects are used often to introduce Lean technologies and tools to interested companies. Working level pilots are a way for the corporate leadership to see these technologies in action and judge their impact to the bottom line. They also help workers get comfortable with the technologies and participate in decisions about how they will be implemented. The downside of pilots is that they receive extraordinary amounts of support and attention, almost guaranteeing them success. Without intensive support, a pilot can fail quickly and become an embarrassment to the overall change effort.

Another problem is management over relying on a series of pilots (serial kaizens) to implement lean across the organization. This incremental approach is much too simplistic and fails to tap the real potential of the pilot project to highlight support areas of the organization needing change, so this new way of working can be effectively sustained over time.

Finally rushing to implement a “successful pilot” everywhere at once is one of the major reasons organization-wide change efforts fail. At the start, while everyone worries about resistance to change, I worry about leadership “loving the program to death” insisting on goals and schedules that the organization cannot possibly support. This rushing the implement also makes it impossible to learn from failures and build capable systems to sustain the change.

Painting Fences vs. Growing Gardens

In the early 90s, I worked with a large muffler manufacturer that wanted to learn about kanban and work cell design. The pilots, as always were great successes. Management was happy, the workers were happy, and soon everyone was agreeing that work cells were going to be a big part of this plant’s future. Six weeks later, those same pilots were failing badly. The reasons were numerous: Not enough tow trucks to support small batch deliveries to the line, problems with machinery that forced maintenance to break up the cell organization to do repairs, losing trained team members because of a contractual bumping process with little time to train their replacements.
The early success of the pilots was largely due to the extra support and attention they received. When that disappeared, they all began to fail. Management complained to supervision about falling behind the implementation schedules. If supervisors raised issues, management dismissed them as excuses. These leaders viewed organizational change as a routine mechanical process—like painting the slats on a fence. Change was incremental and predictable. You painted each slat the same way, in the same amount of time, one after the other until the total task was complete. Change was easy to schedule, inspect and control through inspection.

However, I find effective pilot management to be more like gardening than fence painting. Leaders must stop being project inspectors and learn to become attentive gardeners, always looking for ways to make the working environment supportive of the change. Just as a gardener goes out every morning to look at vegetable plants to see if they need more water, fertilizer, or pest control, a leader has to visit the pilot projects and see what is working and what is not. Pilots become valuable sources of information about larger system capabilities—like the overall environment in the garden—instead of individual slats on a fence.

When a setback or failure occurs, leaders must quickly identify its causes and find effective countermeasures. In our earlier cell pilot project, we needed a new tote supply system, dedicated line maintenance, and a renegotiated worker placement process. Once these were in place, people in other areas saw that management was serious about supporting the change. Employees became less resistant and even started asking for the program to be introduced in their work areas ahead of the implementation schedule.

Managers often will not admit that extraordinary support is needed by a pilot project to remain successful. Perhaps they think the initial success is enough to show proposed change is a good idea. Or they may be afraid that discussing issues and constraints will dampen everyone’s enthusiasm for the change. What they need to see is most pilots are a "hot house plant" and can only survive with extraordinary support and attention. And it is the specifics of that support, which provides management clues about what needs to change in the larger system for the change to be successful.

It would be wiser to sell the pilot projects as a test of the new technology in a supportive setting. However, they are also experiments to help determine what has to change in the larger organization for the piloted technology to sustain and spread just like a garden plant.

**Releasing the brakes**

In another example, a large brake manufacturer was using a fence-painting approach to introduce a shop floor 5S workplace organization program. They had defined all the steps in the 5S implementation—training, project identification, audits, recognition, and so on—and were just grinding it out, class after class, department after department, slat after slat.
When a project area faltered, management treated it as an isolated incident. For them, managing change was about finding what was behind schedule and making people feel guilt or fear so they would catch up. There was no sharing of issues and lessons learned from one pilot area to the next. There was no examination of the capabilities of the larger support system to support the change. Legitimate complaints were dismissed as excuses. Moreover, supervisors stopped working on the change.

To save the program I had to convince management that they were not painting fences but growing gardens. With this new attitude, failing pilots now became sources of information about what needed to change in the larger system to make it supportive of a 5S working organization. In this case, the issues were spot labor shortages, excessive overtime, serious machine downtime, and supervisors who did not understand or believe in the 5S principles. Once management went to work on these problems, the implementation simply became easier to do than not to do. Again, areas that were not in the first wave spontaneously began doing 5S projects on their own. Some went so far as to copy the basic training manuals and train workers on their own.

**Ten keys to effective pilot management**  
Here are some tips on using pilot projects to make lasting system-wide change:

1. Insist that the leadership team work only on problems appropriate to their level of the organization. Their central role should be direct, delegate and manage constraints.
2. Make sure all pilots are well supported but do not go to extremes. It is better to have a pilot that fails and learn from it than one that succeeds while everyone knows it was just a “hot house plant.”
3. Make certain the purpose of each pilot is clear and support groups know their roles and responsibilities. After each success, ensure that these support groups get the recognition they deserve.
4. Know what you will measure to judge the pilot’s effectiveness. Have running historical data available whenever possible. Project planning tools are fine for scheduling and resource planning but make sure you do not focus on completion targets and results alone.
5. Track all issues that come up during the pilots. Also, note what is going exceptionally well because that could serve as a best practice example for other areas.
6. Visit the pilot site often. Talk to the people about what is actually going on, what problems they are encountering, and why it is important to keep advancing the change. Consider those issues but do not act on them until you are clear about their dynamics and impact on the overall change effort.
7. Work to bring people together so they can see failures, countermeasures and solutions from one another. Do not tolerate repetitive failures. It is ok to fail once and learn from it but to fail twice for the same reason is unacceptable.
8. Encourage people to discuss what is not working and why. If no one has any problems to discuss with others, your change goals are too easy. Insist that they speak with data and look for the root causes of problems. Do not let people blame one another. Investigate openly and honestly. Find out what happened, not who did it.

9. Use formal audits to encourage people to continue using the new technologies and follow process standards.

10. Where possible, implement system changes in the larger organization to make the next pilots easier to do.

Sustainable organization-wide change is not the result of a repetitive series of projects implemented in a fence-painting fashion, monitored by managers focused on variances to plan and blame. Each pilot project is actually a unique experiment where leadership, through careful observation and follow-up, learns what parts of the organization support the change and what parts do not. By working on the pilot’s environment—materials, methods, measures, technological support, information, skills, or proper incentives—a “gardener” style of leadership slowly changes the conditions in the organization, making it easier for people to embrace the new technologies instead of holding onto the old.

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