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Making Lean Leaders

Ariens internship program develops lean and leadership skills

By George Taninecz

Ariens Co. makes Sno-Thros®, mowers, and string trimmers. The Brillion, WI-based manufacturer also has been making lean leaders out of its employees, using an internal lean internship program to develop talent throughout the company -- production floor to front offices -- and steeping them in lean and leadership principles.

CEO Dan Ariens calls the lean internship program “a raging success. There’s nothing close to it. I think it’s the best program we have.” The program epitomizes many of the company’s 15 guiding principles and core values -- “think,” “leaders,” and “encourage intellectual curiosity” (see [Ariens Principles](#)) -- and has enabled Ariens to exponentially develop a lean culture.

Ariens began lean 2001, taking “an inch-wide mile-deep” learning approach, says Paul Leao, director of lean resources and currently co-director of the internship program along with Loren Richmond, director of operations. Leao, who was part of that inch-wide team, says, “We took a small group of people and really gave them the education.”

Jeff Hebbard, vice president of operations, and Bob Bradford, vice president of supply chain and logistics, currently head Ariens’ Brillion and non-Brillion facilities, respectively, and led the lean start. Hebbard recalls learning initiatives prior to lean. “We *talked* about all kinds of things. All that learning was done in conference rooms. We never truly went out and tried things like we do now.”

It was apparent as Ariens committed to its lean journey that shop-floor employees would need to take a lead in making improvements, says Hebbard. There were simply too many opportunities. The internship began soon thereafter under Steve Cochran, a lean manager. Richmond and Leao have continued to develop and expand the program, with about 10% of Ariens’ 650 Brillion employees having completed an internship. “The internship program is really driving the culture that it’s OK to change, it’s OK to try new things,” says Bradford.

“My objective for [interns] is really to make them front-line lean leaders,” says Richmond. “When we’re done, they’re out on the shop floor, at the gemba, and they’re

the ones teaching others about lean, being a lean leader, and making the right decisions when it comes to flow, pull, processes and all those kinds of things. The point of the program is to make them a different type of leader.”

Production Internship Program

A typical lean internship program in production lasts six months and consists of two to six interns. Initially value-stream managers were identifying who should be an intern. “We realized that sometimes they did not select the right people,” says Leao. The process was changed to post intern positions, helping to ensure that those who want an internship are the ones to apply. Approximately 20 employees apply for each program, and a recommendation form also must be completed by an applicant’s supervisor. Interns are then selected based on two rounds of interviews by Richmond and Leao -- the first focuses on technical aspects and the second explores applicant behavior. Those who don’t get selected receive coaching as to why they were not selected, and many reapply.

Interns come from various production areas -- welders, assemblers, testers, etc. -- and many come into the program as a team leader. The general top-to-bottom hierarchy at Ariens is operations managers, manufacturing leader/supervisors, team leaders, and associates (ratios of about 1:6). Team leaders do not have direct reports but serve as point persons offering guidance in their area, working the same jobs as fellow employees. About half of the approximately 85 team leaders have completed the internship program. Richmond says Ariens regularly reviews team leaders, tracking how many have completed an internship, job-instruction training, and the Ariens formalized problem-solving process. Three of the four current interns are team leaders.

Interns spend most of their time on the shop floor, but also share office space with directors. “One of the big components of how this works is the fact that we are co-located,” says Leao. “We deal with the here-and-now, the in-the-moment training. They’re trying to do something on the production floor, making an improvement, they come in, and we hear, ‘That just didn’t work out. I’m frustrated.’ We take the time and say, ‘Let’s talk about it.’”

Ariens Kaizen Events

Typical [kaizen](#) events at Ariens Co. last a week-- preparation, the event, and then follow-up and presentations -- and they are a major component of learning within Ariens, both for interns as well as other employees participating. About 150 formal kaizen events occur annually at Ariens, and more than 1,000 have taken place since 2001.

When lean was beginning at Ariens, the company could not do enough events to address all the problems they were uncovering, says Bob Bradford, VP supply and logistics. The frequency of events has declined in recent years as operations stabilized, and some shorter events now take place, especially in office settings. Jeff Hebbard, VP operations, estimates that 95% to 98% of events have been effective either in getting desired results and/or in helping participants learn something in the process.

Leao and Richmond explore problems with interns, using the Socratic method to help them uncover solutions and find meaning in failed attempts. “You are never going to succeed all the time when you’re trying things,” says Richmond. “You are going to have failures, and the important part is that you’re learning from your failures and not repeating them later.”

The internship program emphasizes both lean and leadership. “We look at these individuals as being the next leaders of the organization,” Leao says. “With that in mind, we need to make sure they have solid lean skills -- not only understand them but know how to apply them -- and solid leadership skills as well.” The two-prong curriculum requires that interns participate on a minimum of eight kaizen events (most participate on 10 to 12 events), co-lead two events, and lead one event. Kaizen work consumes much of an intern’s first three months ([see Ariens Kaizen Events](#)).

In addition to kaizen event activities, production interns also are in charge of performing 5S audits, ensuring the work of other auditors, and entering all audit scoring. Interns must also read and report on two books (one lean, one leadership) in the six-month period and perform 18 “kaizen implements” or “do its,” documenting the improvements. “What’s really important to these 18 kaizen implements is that they need to be solicited from the floor,” says Leao. “It cannot be something they’ve done on a kaizen event, and it can’t be their own idea. They need to go out and talk to people on the floor and ask the questions, ‘How can I help you? What can I do to make this better for you?’”

Each week interns spend two hours with Leao or Richmond reviewing their week’s work and the concepts they’ve been learning. Directors ask about the challenges they’ve faced doing implements and on kaizen events. Interns frankly describe what they’re encountering on the gemba, their struggles and their successes.

Lastly and importantly, production interns must undertake a significant lean project. Directors will suggest ideas, but it’s ultimately the intern’s responsibility to decide. Since they’re forced to work in various departments and meet new people and problems, interns encounter many potential projects. And departments seek out their help, suggesting project ideas to the interns and directors. “It’s gotten to the point where people in operations realize what the interns can do, and how they can do things nicely as a project,” says Leao. Projects have ranged from setting up a fabrication cell or assembly cell for a new product line to putting in an emergency evacuation program.

When production interns complete the program, they return to their previous role or often apply for promotions. A surprising cornerstone of the Ariens lean internship program is that their managers accept having interns absent from their production jobs, even though those employees remain on their budgets and the managers are still held accountable to productivity goals. In fact, a department may have more than one intern in the program at a time. “Managers have come to realize that they want their people to go through an internship because they know and realize what they can do once they get them back. ...

That's the kind of commitment we're getting from the managers in the organization," says Leao.

"Everyone here understands it's a long-term investment," adds Richmond. And it is an investment. Four individuals full-time for six months, plus sensei time and materials come to tens of thousands of dollars annually. "If I invest \$200,000 or whatever it may be, what am I getting in return? If you really look at that, and [interns] go out and are able to make several significant improvements after they're out of the internship, I'm willing to bet they pay for themselves in the first year."

Production Interns

Interns, too, recognize the many benefits of investing their time in the program. Former intern (called "extern") Jim Schrubbe was working in shipping when he applied for the internship program two years ago. Going into the program he knew that Ariens operated in a lean way, but wasn't sure what made that so. "I knew we were doing it, and after [the internship program] I knew why we were doing it and how we were doing it." He came out of the program and became a material technician, and, he says, was looked to as a go-to guy based on his acquired knowledge of lean tools and how they're applied in making improvements.

"It makes you more passionate about what you do when you come out of it," says Brenda Brooks. "To do it for your team, to know they see the things you're doing can improve work for them and their environment. That's big. People appreciate that." Brooks worked on the line for a half dozen years, became a team leader, and went through the internship program four years ago. The program forced her to be a leader and communicator, roles that previously made her uncomfortable. "The fear of getting up in front of people and talking, the thought of that almost made me sick to my stomach. The internship has really helped me approach people. ... That was big for me, and was why it took me so long to apply for the internship." She is now a team leader for five different product lines.

"It teaches you and gives you opportunities to improve the ways you communicate with others, which is, at least for me, the basis of leadership and what we're doing here," says John Melotte. He started at Ariens in production welding and worked up to team leader in the department. "Before the program, we knew the tools were there, and we saw them being practiced by other people, but I didn't know how to use the tools to get the results. I didn't learn until I was in the program to look at things with a critical eye to find the nonvalue-added." After completing the program, Melotte returned to a role as team leader in the welding/fabrication department. "I went back empowered with a fresh set of eyes, thinking, 'How do I take my own area now and implement the things I learned.'"

There is no wage increase or guarantee of a better position attached to an internship, but it can be a springboard for advancement. Schrubbe says, "You hear it so many times from people in this company: 'You get out of it what you put into it.' ... Our company loves to promote from within, and if you have a lean internship under your belt, it's a

huge thing to have as far as career advancement opportunities. ... It turned what I thought was a job into my career.”

Office Internship Program

As lean improvements spread off the Ariens plant floor and into its offices, a separate lean internship program was developed for administration functions. Chief Financial Officer Stewart Witkov says the all-consuming internship program as used in production presented challenges in the office. It was difficult to completely remove someone from an office role in accounting, customer service, human resources, etc.

Production can “backfill” roles that are left vacant by an intern, says Tom Murphy, former IT director, director of process improvement, and director of the office internship program. “You can’t do that in the office because we have a lot of people doing one-offs. We don’t have eight people doing those things, we have one person doing those things.”

The office internship program keeps employees in their current jobs while they are an intern. But like the production program, the internship is focused on observing, doing, and leading. Office interns must participate on six kaizen events, co-lead one event, lead one event, attend training sessions, participate in 5S audits, read and report on two books, lead two lean training events, and perform 10 kaizen implements.

“When we started, we said it should take about six months. It has varied between six months and 12 months, and we’ve got some people that are over 12 months,” says Murphy. Six people have graduated and three employees are currently in the program.

Maintaining a full-time administrative role and an internship can be challenging, says Peter Johnson, IT director and office extern. But, he notes, if you’re in administration and not in the internship program, you’re still expected to attend training, keep learning, work on improvements, and participate in events -- both office and production.

Johnson has been at Ariens for two years, and says he quickly was impressed by the impact of lean and the internship program. “I was surprised when I got here, from an IT perspective, how much waste was taken out of our administrative processes just through these events and through the methodologies and the tools that lean brings, in terms of how we deal not only with our suppliers but with our customers, our dealers. The automation we’ve been able to achieve and the handoffs ... are to the point where the basic stuff happens automatically and people deal with the exceptions.” An IT staff of 11 persons manages approximately a dozen locations, says Johnson.

Witkov says the goal is to have everyone touching an office value stream complete the internship program, and most employees at and above managerial levels have already participated. Unlike in production, office interns are selected, he adds, although the approximately 24 office staff in Brillion understand they must eventually go through the internship program if they want to advance. The office program does not offer additional wages, but some participants may have their bonus objectives linked to completing an internship.

Lean learning and application in the office have enabled Ariens to incorporate recent corporate acquisitions without dramatically increasing administrative staff, and it's helping to manage the challenge of implementing an enterprise resource planning (ERP) system. The ERP project reveals the need for lean and lean learning in the office, especially within IT. Witkov points out that “a high percentage of the continuous improvement events that we have in the office need IT facilitation. There is something in the system that is a blocker to doing things efficiently.” With that in mind, he says, Ariens carefully selected an ERP system that isn't “hard-coded,” one that IT staff can change and adapt as Ariens processes are changed and improved.

Taking on More Challenges

In recent years Ariens has acquired companies, entered new markets (golf- and sports-turf equipment) and launched and expanded product lines. “The company directly attributes its ability to remain solvent in the increasingly competitive global marketplace to the contributions of employees using lean practices,” reads its corporate history. Core to that competitiveness is the internship program, says Hebbard. “This is building us a stronger company. We're doing more new products and product families than ever before. I don't know that we could handle it if we didn't have a lot of people we could depend on to do a lot of things.”

Bradford says Ariens ability to meet challenges and ongoing improvements are “rewarding because it's not Jeff and me. We started this deal, but it's not us. It's not Paul. It's not Loren. It's people out on the shopfloor. Today we had kaizen presentations, and there were very few salaried people up there. It's almost all shop-floor people, and they were taking on hard problems.”

Hebbard and Bradford point out that the internship program is not perfect, and a few externs may have “forgotten” what they learned. But they also note that coaching and mentoring of manufacturing leaders and holding interns accountable usually keeps that from happening, as does ongoing improvement of the program.

“Not everyone that goes thorough the lean internship program is going to become a line supervisor or the next-level leader,” says CEO Ariens. “But we have a much better chance of finding out who's going to become the next leader.”

Richmond estimates that less than 10% of interns regress, and even those rates have improved as the program added the interview process, recommendation form, and an increasingly robust curriculum. “We've actually made the internship program significantly harder to get through than it was in the very beginning. We've continued to make the curriculum harder and we're covering more topics.” He adds that interns today also enter the program more versed in lean concepts because lean is now such a part of the culture, unlike earlier years of the program (continued on page 8).

Ariens 15 Principles

The 15 Principles of the Ariens Management System are based on the technique of lean manufacturing, a culture of continuous improvement. They are the standard work of Ariens Company management.

Ariens Company is a performance driven company. Continuous improvement and waste elimination are incorporated into every employee's job and each of the company's business processes.

Living the Ariens Company vision, "Passionate People ... Astounded Customers," requires that employees press on to exceedingly higher performance levels and develop a culture with leaders at every level.

Culture

1. Core Values

Ariens culture is built upon our Core Values and the pursuit of our vision to astound customers.

Ariens Core Values:

- Be honest
 - Be fair
 - Keep our commitments
 - Respect the individual
 - Encourage Intellectual curiosity
2. **Long-Term:** Base management decisions on a long-term vision, even at the expense of short-term financial goals.
 3. **Leaders:** Effective leaders develop the individuals around them. The continuous improvement of people is vital to our growth as an organization.
 4. **Technology:** Use reliable, thoroughly-tested technology that serves our customers, processes and people.

People

5. **Development:** We choose to develop exceptional people and build teams that embrace the Ariens Company culture and vision.
6. **Learn:** Continuous improvement requires a learning organization that thinks strategically in pursuit of perfection.
7. **Quality:** Start with robust design. Stop to fix problems to get quality right the first time.

Process

8. **Flow:** The right process will produce the right results.
9. **Pull:** Use pull replenishment systems to avoid overproduction.
10. **Level Load:** Level out the workload ([heijunka](#)). Work like the tortoise, not the hare.
11. **Standard Work:** Standardized tasks are the foundation for continuous improvement and employee empowerment.
12. **Visual:** Use visual control so problems are not hidden and flow is easily understood.
13. **Supply Chain:** Respect our extended network of supplier partners by challenging their practices and helping them improve.
14. **Just get Dirty:** Go and see for yourself to thoroughly understand the situation. Continuously solving problems drives improvement and organizational learning.
15. **Think:** Make decisions with the involvement of many people. Thoroughly consider all options and implement decisions rapidly.

Source: Ariens Co.

“I think one of the reasons it’s been more successful in the last few years is because Paul and Loren have become really good [sensei](#),” says Hebbard. “They’ve grown into being able to teach people well, ask questions, and challenge rather than just tell them to go on a kaizen event. They work at trying to grow that person. They spend time going out to externs, talking to them and challenging them a bit.” Leao and Richmond are now transitioning their role to a new director.

In addition to good sensei and a solid curriculum, Ariens executives stress the need for commitment and getting the right people into the program. The two go hand in hand. Bradford says many companies are afraid to remove their best line performers because managers worry about productivity dropping. That’s not the case at Ariens, where “you’ve got to think Ariens first and value stream second.”

For More Information

[Ariens Co.](#) -- The Ariens family of brands includes outdoor power equipment for both consumer and commercial use. The company’s premium brands include Ariens Sno-Thro® and Ariens zero-turn mowers for consumers; Gravely®, EverRide® and Great Dane® commercial lawn equipment for professional landscape contractors; and National® specialty mowers and Locke® reel mowers for the golf, turf, and sports turf industries. Ariens’ subsidiary, Stens Corporation and its Australian counterpart, Bynorm Group, supply replacement parts to the outdoor power equipment industry.

[Lean Enterprise Institute](#) -- Founded in 1997 by management expert [James P. Womack](#), Ph.D., LEI is a nonprofit education, publishing, conference, and research organization with a mission to advance lean thinking around the world. LEI runs monthly regional workshops on basic and more advanced lean tools. These include “[Value-Stream Mapping for the Office and Service](#)” and “[Optimizing Flow in Office and Service Processes](#).”

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Glossary

(Adapted from the [Lean Lexicon](#))

Five Ss

Five related terms, beginning with an S sound, describing workplace practices conducive to visual control and lean production. The five terms in Japanese are:

1. Seiri: Separate needed from unneeded items -- tools, parts, materials, paperwork - and discard the unneeded.
2. Seiton: Neatly arrange what is left—a place for everything and everything in its place.

3. Seiso: Clean and wash.
4. Seiketsu: Cleanliness resulting from regular performance of the first three Ss.
5. Shitsuke: Discipline, to perform the first four Ss.

Heijunka

Leveling the type and quantity of production over a fixed period of time. This enables production to efficiently meet customer demands while avoiding batching and results in minimum inventories, capital costs, manpower, and production lead time through the whole value stream.

Sensei

The Japanese term for “teacher.” Used by Lean Thinkers to denote a master of lean knowledge as a result of years of experience in transforming the gemba (the place where work actually is done). The sensei also must be an easily understood and inspiring teacher.

Standardized Work

Establishing precise procedures for each operator’s work in a production process, based on three elements:

1. Takt time, which is the rate at which products must be made in a process to meet customer demand.
2. The precise work sequence in which an operator performs tasks within takt time.
3. The standard inventory, including units in machines, required to keep the process operating smoothly.

Standardized work, once established and displayed at workstations, is the object of continuous improvement through kaizen. The benefits of standardized work include documentation of the current process for all shifts, reductions in variability, easier training of new operators, reductions in injuries and strain, and a baseline for improvement activities.