

From Lean Thinking to 'Thinking' Lean

By Prof. K. Zokaei, 2009

2009 marked the 20th anniversary of the term lean being coined by John Krafcik – now Acting President and CEO of Hyundai Motor America. In his Masters dissertation at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology where Krafcik was researching the comparative performance of automotive assembly in Japan vs. West, he used the term to describe Toyota's ability to do more with less. During the past two decades much effort has gone into imitating Toyota Production System in manufacturing as well as translating its roots and principles for other sectors such as retail and service. While billions have been saved through just-in-time processes and total quality management, engaging people and sustaining improvements remain an enormous challenge for lean managers.

Managers are faced with the dilemma that implementing new and more efficient systems could lead to losing employees' engagement in new ways of working. Some attempt to communicate or to 'explain' the need for the new system for example by sending middle managers and supervisors on training programmes. However plausible, this hardly solves the problem since explanation is barely synonymous with understanding which comes from a far deeper and more hands-on engagement with work. At the same time, it is no wonder that change doesn't stick where workers do not appreciate the necessity of the new way of working. Organisations and managers, who clearly see the benefits of the new system, often respond by forcing change through with an iron fist. The result is the creation of 'dumb down' systems within which the role of the worker is reduced to a powerless doer. As such we simply eliminate 'thinking' from working and from lean improvement! This is clearly in stark contradiction to the very core of lean thinking which aims to put thinking back into the frontline.

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Customers and employees are victims of 'dumb down' systemisation alike. How many times have you dialled up to a call centre or walked into a customer service centre to find out that the front line staff are no more able to help you than reading from a computer page and referring you to another department. A job that surely makes them feel as a mere adjuncts to the machine.

According to Taiichi Ohno, the father of Toyota Production System, the two pillars of lean are JIT (which in a broader context can be interpreted as continuous flow) and Jidoka. Jidoka is translated as automation with a human touch, intelligent automation or 'autonomation'. Yet this aspect of TPS is mostly ignored in the West where most of the lean literature (including the best selling 'Lean Thinking' by Womack and Jones) focus on the JIT pillar of TPS. Whereas simple automation is concerned with efficiency and labour reduction, autonomation focuses on effectiveness, on quality improvement, and the independence of the worker from the system.

In Taiichi Ohno's language, automation applies to any sort of systemisation – any situation that involves replacing human activities and decisions with a process. Far from turning the worker into the adjunct of the machine, TPS insists on frontline employees' ability to make decisions, to absorb variety and to react to quality issues as much as possible, e.g. stopping the line to fix the problem which on the surface appears to be even disruptive to continuous flow. Simply put, Jidoka is about putting thinking back into working. That's why in TPS standardisation is a way of workers helping themselves to improve the process, rather than a method of control. Compare this to any average manufacturing process or even a call centre where frontline staff have very little authority to address variations in work outside the imposed controls, let alone to stop the line and ask for (pull) help.

Dumb down systemisation is ubiquitous in both manufacturing and service. I recently visited a local authority that have saved millions of pounds by simply sending several social workers and expert staff to visit customers at the same time and at the first point of contact, rather than allowing unnecessary hand offs between less experienced frontline employees to back office expert staff and amongst various expertise within the back offices. By putting expert staff at the front who are enabled to think and absorb the

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requirements of the customers, this local authority have not only saved staggering sums of money but also improved service waiting times five fold.

In another example I recently spent time with one of the UK's leading retailers which had spent huge amounts on implementation of a new supply chain IT system. Our investigation revealed that the users were not briefed about the way the system worked as an integrated whole and did not understand it outside their own immediate function leading to conflicting behaviour and demand distortion between stores, regional distribution centre, central distribution centre and suppliers. A simple simulation showed that if the system was switched off demand amplification would also come under control. In this case the behaviour of agents was driven by the IT system while their ability to think was severely dampened. One employee told me that the "old manual system worked much better"! My hope is that in the third decade of lean, and following the principle of Jidoka, we move towards a more 'thinking' lean.

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