



How a Culture of Empowered Teams Creates Lean Success

Podcast #20 Transcript

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Teams are more creative and achieve higher levels of production and quality than any single person. Companies that empower their teams achieve the desired level of success in implementing and sustaining Lean. Employees are not widgets. They are items in the value stream to be eliminated. Their brains, their passion, and their creativity need to be developed and nourished. The transformation of your organization depends on their involvement. You need to treat them as an asset and invest in their development just as you invest in any other asset in your company.

Constantly communicate to them what you are doing to develop and empower them. Also constantly tell them how the culture is changing for the better and how they are a critical part of the change. Keep them aware of the progress the company is making. Companies that communicate constantly not only in the team meeting but also from the top down demonstrate that employees are a valuable part of the business. Communication on every level sends the message that everyone matters.

Celebrate your successes large and small. My son-in-law owns Titan Custom Yachts. He often celebrates meeting weekly targets with a pizza party for the employees. He uses the time to communicate their progress and the value of his employees in creating a quality product. My team won an award for the most creative and effective use of multi-media to streamline sales training. Each member received a gift and we celebrated together with a crab feast in St. Michaels on the Chesapeake Bay. The celebration brought us even closer and everyone realized that we could not have won if we had not worked together as a team and put the team goal above our own personal goals.

As I have viewed many teams in many companies, I can clearly see that working together in a specific area under a manager does not make a team. Working together and buying into the team mission is one way the group bonds. Another way is taking responsibility for the team goals. I was a Program Manager for a sales and technical



support training development team. We were responsible for launch as well as standard skills training. We had many projects and a busy schedule. If a deadline was close, we managers would lend our skills and those of our team members to the area that required assistance. As a Lean team we aimed for a smooth flow in the value stream but as in any large organization, things can change quickly. Events created by competition or product development, in turn, created changes in the training program. We needed to work together to ensure we produced a quality product and delivered it on time. As we worked together to solve problems and achieve our goals, we learned from each other and our skills improved. This led to the NSPI training industry award.

Our team formed strong bonds and 20 years later, we are all in other jobs or retired. We live as much as 4 hours apart but we meet for lunch once a quarter and we continue to communicate by phone and email. As a team, we had put personal goals second to team goals and thus formed bonds that cannot be broken.

Just as our team did, employees improve current skills and develop new ones. When I joined the team in 1990, I learned workstation and software skills from my teammate Tony and both Doug and Tony learned sales skills from me. I loved working together to solve a problem or to create a new program. It was so interesting to watch how one idea inspired another and then another until we reached a solution that we could test.

The creation of a mission statement is important for the team. It has to reflect the reason the team exists and has to be the guideline for decisions. The team I have been discussing did just that. Our manager was directly involved but we were empowered to ensure those who worked for us would buy into the final result. We worked for weeks to create what we called our Destiny Document. It was not something handed down by headquarters. We created it and we owned it. Therefore, we could believe it and use it to guide us. Our Destiny Document not only included the mission statement, but it also included a description of how we were aligned to the corporate mission, our vision, and the principles that guided how we would work together to achieve our goals. We posted it in our conference room and made adjustments as the team evolved and grew. We said that it was a living evergreen document that was our team guide. It was so helpful when we met to discuss new projects or to solve problems. We looked to the document



to ensure we were aligned. Our team level of success does not come easy. The Lean tools just as the Leadership Through Quality tools we used when this journey began are easy to understand. However, changing the culture to ensure the Lean success takes dedication and work. W. Edwards Deming, the father of the quality evolution said. "I am often asked: 'Come do for us what you did for Japan! Just like instant pudding. Wish it were that simple. But it takes a long time and consistency of effort.'" Companies that have put in the effort have reaped the benefits many times over.

In his book *Lean Printing, Cultural Imperatives for Success*, Kevin Cooper suggests creating islands of excellence. That strategy will build success in an area before moving to full-fledged self-directed Lean teams across the facility or enterprise. Kevin suggests beginning with an area where the likelihood of success is high. It is like the common phrase "How do you eat an elephant? One bite at a time" Taking steps like creating islands of excellence helps develop your skills and knowledge about creating a Lean culture in your environment. Each organization is unique so there is no cookie cutter pattern that fits every company. Yes, the strategies and tools are common but each company has its own personalities, cultures, and processes. You need to assess your company status and develop a plan of action to move toward a Lean culture and the implementation of Lean processes.

As I go through Lean certification for specific areas, I reflect on the good foundation I developed in Leadership Through Quality. One of the things I carried through to my social organizations was the formalization of roles. They were so effective I trained one of my charity organizations on them and we became much more effective and productive. Every team member has a role to play and the establishment of roles is imperative to establish a successful team. Let me give you a quick overview.

A team needs a leader. This person ensures the meetings are scheduled and resources are available. I liked the document our leader created as it listed the resources for which each person was responsible. The leader gathers the items for the agenda and communicates it to everyone who is to attend the meeting including guests from other areas.



The facilitator ensures that quality interactive skills are used. This was especially important when members did not agree. But the use of other skills such as testing understanding and seeking information helped avoid misunderstandings. The person in this role helps the team develop trust, respect, stronger communication skills, and member involvement.

The scribe usually has the task of getting things on the whiteboard for all to see and agree upon as well as publishing the minutes and decision agreements after the meeting.

The timekeeper helps ensure the meeting is run effectively and stays on track. The person lets the team know the time allowed for discussion of a topic and alerts the team when they are near the end of time. They can then decide to alter the agenda or agree more discussion is required and move the topic to the next meeting or set a special meeting if the topic is urgent. This role communicates that everyone's time is respected and valuable.

Every person on the team has the responsibility as a member to participate. The facilitator ensures they are included by bringing them into the discussion and not allowing them to be shut out. However, they also have the responsibility of being an active participant and bringing items from their area to the team for discussion.

I liked that our agenda had the list of items and the allotted time as well as the resources required. It was sent at least two days in advance of regularly scheduled meetings so each member could be prepared with their agenda items and thoughts on items for which others were responsible.

There are different types of meetings and a formal agenda but rather a guideline of topics may be all that is necessary. For example in hospitals, police departments, manufacturing and other organizations, there is a daily shift turn over meeting. Those leaving their shift and their leader provide updates, issues and a briefing on anything that needs to be addressed.



You may need an outside trainer or consultant to help your team learn the elements of each type of meeting and how to run effective meetings. We had a member of the corporate quality team get us started.

This leads me to invest in training to achieve teamwork and empowerment. Yes, there are real hard dollars to be spent on these soft skills but the return on your investment is there. Not in a product per se but how you function and the future sustainability of your company and its implementation of Lean.

Aristotle said, “We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence, then, is not an act, but a habit.” Training must include doing. Doing is the highest level of learning. Once the behavior is explained and demonstrated, the employee must apply them in real situations. There you can observe where the learner is in her thinking and her skill development. It is then that coaching has the greatest impact. Toyota also has found that training and coaching are still not enough. You have to help the employee grow and evolve. Practicing what is known as PDCA or plan, do check and act. The employee is advised of the target condition and the coach provides feedback and asks questions to develop the thinking that leads to the desired result. This process helps the employee develop a feeling of success and reinforces the behavior. The new behavior must become a habit. I remember the coaching for quality and now it is part of my DNA. I follow the quality steps on autopilot.

Remember that Lean is not something that engages like plugging in a new product like a TV. It is journey and one that does not come easily but the rewards for you and your company are well worth the effort. It is a proven process and change in behaviors that have worked for other organizations and it can work to bring you success and sustainability.