



Most companies realize that they possess neither the internal expertise nor the time to design, train, implement, and sustain a lean program on their own. To ignite an enterprise to embrace a lean culture, an increasing number of manufacturers are turning to a training and mentoring track that provides in-house expertise to help companies not only start but also sustain that transformation: lean certification.

**What Is Lean Certification?**

Lean certification is a validation process that delivers training in lean principles in both classroom and real-time situations. These latter experiences occur under the guidance of a seasoned mentor who possesses real-world success in lean environments.

Rather than just sitting through theoretical lessons, students learn how to apply their training directly to their own companies. As part of the curriculum, participants are required to define their companies' value streams and identify strategic projects for their own sites and are then held accountable for project sustainment and performance metrics. In addition to strategic planning, successful implementation, and the on-time delivery of projects, the curriculum for certification addresses budget objectives that lead to significant return on investment.

Following the completion of each training session, participants are tested before being allowed to proceed to the next level of training and must complete an extensive "lean transformation exercise" based on actual scenarios before they are certified.

Lean certification not only trains participants to fully understand key lean concepts but also sensitizes them to the need to understand psychological and sociological change strategies in order to address, and overcome, barriers, resistance to change, and sustainment challenges that will threaten the success of their organization's lean journey.

**A Pulse Check**

TBM has now graduated several classes of lean-certified practitioners. We talked with these graduates to see if their expectations were met by the program.

Across the board, participants found the combination of classroom training and hands-on activities "in the field" to be invaluable. Six Sigma Master Black Belt Greg Masciana of Tektronix in Beaverton, OR, has read a number of books on lean, but said "The three weeks of hands-on kaizen work at three different sites was more useful than I could have imagined."

"The combination of classroom instruction, simulations, and hands-on work created a depth of understanding that truly made lean happen [here]," Masciana says. "It helped build my confidence to the point where I'm comfortable answering other people's questions."

Aditi Gilman, formerly with Appleton Papers in Roaring Spring, PA, echoed Masciana's sentiments. Like Masciana, Gilman found the hands-on work shadowing a TBM consultant at client sites to be invaluable. Gilman believes that going through lean certification training is one way for a company to get people more energized in a lean transformation, specifically the cultural change.

Greg Leisgang is a 32-year Appleton employee (at the plant in Appleton, WI) who also went through the lean certification process. Going through certification gave him the opportunity to learn new techniques using lean tools. "It's been an eye-opener," he says. "I wish I had gotten this training years ago—I would have managed differently. The biggest positive change is that we're really sustaining things now."

Leisgang points out another benefit he gained from the training program—networking. “I didn’t know some of my colleagues who also took the course,” he remarks. “Now I have access to internal expertise and people to discuss things with.” The advantages of networking also extend to outside companies who also sent people to the course. “I’ve kept up with them—we can discuss issues and difficulties. It gives me sources to bounce ideas off—lean veterans who have ‘been in battle.’”

Another lean certification graduate is Todd Kearns of Saint-Gobain Containers, Inc., in Dolton, IL. Kearns is heading up the lean transformation in his plant, so he will be responsible for converting a workforce of approximately 400 to lean principles. Gaining his lean certification helped him feel much less overwhelmed than six months earlier at the start of the company’s transformation. “I’m now much more comfortable in my position,” he says. This feeling of comfort and better control is important when dealing with the inevitable roadblocks. “Being able to participate, talk to the consultants and the other participants, and seeing lean in action really distinguishes this course from those that involve strict classroom training like a college course,” Kearns says. “The fact that the class included people from different industries allowed me to stretch [my knowledge and skills].”

Robbie Watters of Compressor Systems, Inc., in Midland, TX, also found the group learning setting to be a big plus. “Many programs are individual or online, but in the group, I could get immediate feedback,” he says. “I still have contact with some of my classmates,” he adds, “and we bounce questions off of each other. That outside help is valuable.” Watters feels that the lean certification course helped him to become more aggressive in tackling the various aspects of Compressor Systems’ lean transformation.

### The Sponsors’ Viewpoint

Lean certification candidates must have a sponsor within the company to help remove roadblocks and to ensure management support of the lean effort.

Anthony Speer of Compressor Systems was Watters’ sponsor. “Over time I could have taught Robbie,” Speer says, “But we needed quick impact—we needed to get there fast...[and] seeing it in action somewhere else helps you to understand the process a whole lot better.”

Masciana’s sponsor at Tektronix, Mike Badnin, sees lean certification as a means of gaining credibility with upper management so that the company can make a successful lean transformation without relying indefinitely on outside help. He sees value in a course structure that allows students to learn from others and build a network.

With Tektronix’ acquisition by Danaher, the culture went from one of having to justify lean efforts to “lean is our way of life.” Having someone who had gone through the lean certification program gave Badnin’s division a step up when word came down that the entire company was going lean.

Brian Frost of Appleton had a similar impetus for sending associates through the certification program: “It jump-started some of our skills and abilities,” he says. “Really learning lean is different from just getting the tools, and lean certification really gets at learning lean.”

“Additionally, it allowed us to quickly facilitate our own events and do the day 1 training ourselves, and that saves money,” he adds. Frost also attended lean certification, so he has dual perspectives as student and sponsor. “It helped us to shape how we were going to deploy lean throughout the organization,” he notes. “It exposed us to the ‘bigger picture,’ and visiting the other companies provided us with some benchmarking.”

Like the other companies in this article, Appleton used lean certification as a means to get up to speed quickly in order to accelerate the benefit gained from lean manufacturing. “We wanted lean to rapidly become a part of our culture, so we wanted to have the internal resources in place to be able to drive change across the organization,” he says. In effect, Appleton was creating its own internal consulting team.

### A Common Viewpoint

More companies are recognizing the value of a lean certification training program to jump start a lean transformation and drive culture change. Being able to rely on internal expertise to produce positive results quickly is a major driving force behind the effort to gain lean certification for associates. In organizations where management may be a bit skeptical about lean, having lean certified staff members who can answer questions and from experience explain the big picture about how lean will affect long-term goals can be the “tipping point.” Most companies also see lean certification as a means to get the most for their training dollar. There’s a reason that lean organizations are also considered learning organizations, and those companies who take that to heart by seeking training to raise the value of their human assets will find themselves in a better position to drive change and sustain it—and that translates into real competitive advantage. ■

