

*Herb Brown*

At the Lean Excellence Conference in September the most popular topic of discussion was about culture and the role of leaders in establishing an effective, sustainable lean enterprise. Strong, inspirational, effective leaders are the common denominator of companies who embed a culture of continuous improvement throughout the organization. What is it that strong leaders do to inspire a can-do spirit, achieve breakthrough growth, and retain passionate, engaged employees? We talk about the role of leadership all the time but somehow it continues to be the elusive ingredient in the formula for success.

Mike Greece, a principal at Padilla, Spear, Beardsley, a NY-based public relations agency, reminisced about his first visit some years ago to Pella Corporation in Pella, Iowa. He spoke about his experience one morning in the Pella parking lot: “I was just blown away by what I saw at Pella. I was nearly run over by an army of employees who just couldn’t wait to get to work. I couldn’t wait to get inside to see what was going on in there that made people so happy to be at work.”

At a recent plant tour of the Vermeer plant in Pella, Iowa, David Corbin, Vermeer’s vice president of manufacturing, presented impressive results in sales, profits, and productivity. He credited the company’s guiding principles, its values, its lean culture, and its strong, committed leadership with increasing levels of employee involvement and satisfaction.

We all have leaders in our organizations—senior leaders, mid-level leaders, and emerging leaders. But what is it that makes the best leaders inspire associates to continually stretch, to deliver extraordinary results, and ultimately emerge as leaders themselves? Both Mel Haight, CEO of Pella, and Mary

Andringa, co-CEO of Vermeer, have created distinctive recipes—something to savor—that include their secret ingredients of success. (And by the way, they’ll both say, “We’re just starting on our journey.”)

If you watch Mary Andringa in action, you’ll see it right away. You will be amazed at her passion and impressed by Vermeer’s success but you won’t quite be able to identify the secret ingredient that makes their culture enviable. Not only has Mary participated in more than 30 one-week-long kaizen events over the past ten years, but she has inspired a whole new crop of leaders who follow in her footsteps and lead by example with the same enthusiasm and commitment.

I know it’s unrealistic to think you can bottle the secret ingredients of leadership and liberally apply them when needed. However, lean leaders consistently demonstrate some common behaviors that should be observed and replicated.

The Power of “Why”

When things go wrong, your standard question should be “Why?” not “Who?” A regular Gemba walk, root cause analysis, 5Y, fishbone diagrams, or just a simple whiteboard “chalk talk” might be all you need to lead your team to success. David Corbin from Vermeer reflected on his children and their constant pursuit of knowledge. Says Corbin, “My kids ask ‘why’ all the time, and so should we.” He added, “Asking ‘why’ gives people the opportunity to express their ideas, to solve problems independently, and to feel a sense of pride and ownership as they develop solutions and achieve results.”

Your role as a leader is to help people learn and grow, to find solutions, to remove barriers, and to encourage an environment of creative problem solving. As a lean leader,



you are always searching for those precious “teachable moments.” If you try to solve all the problems yourself, you’ll never have time for everything else on your plate. Whether you’re a coordinator or a CEO, the power of “why” is an effective tool for engaging others to collaborate and develop more creative solutions.

Lead and Learn by Doing

Don’t underestimate the power of participation. If you’re in a leadership role, there is no better way to gain the respect of your employees than by walking a mile in their shoes. Lean leaders, from the CEO to the most recent hire, lead by example. Lean leaders demonstrate their support with their calendars—that is, with their time.

Larry Culp, CEO of Danaher Corporation, leads a multi-billion dollar organization by aggressively embedding the Danaher Business System in every person, process, plan, and performance metric. Still, he consistently takes time to participate in shop floor and business process events all over the world. Any Danaher employee can

log-on to the Danaher Intranet site any day of the week and find a recent blog by Culp recognizing kaizen team members for their contributions and expressing his amazement and pride with the types of results his associates deliver day in and day out. It’s not unusual to walk into a Danaher kaizen event on Monday morning and find yourself seated next to Larry. He checks his title at the door, rolls up his sleeves, and solves problems just like you and me.

You can bet your bottom dollar and your bottom line that any employee who sees his or her CEO actively engaged in cleaning machines, solving set-up reduction challenges, moving equipment, and so on will be likely to offer unconditional support next time he’s asked to stretch and contribute.

Allocate Time for Continuous Improvement

Standard work isn’t just for machine operators and technicians. It’s for leaders too. Melissa Sawin, formerly the Director of Continuous Improvement at Reviva, took up the task of developing leader standard



work for executives, managers, and supervisors inside her organization. At the 2008 Lean Leaders Exchange in Atlanta, Georgia, Melissa presented the Reviva approach to leader standard work. What’s in your Outlook calendar? Are you allocating an appropriate amount of time to continuous improvement activities? Here’s what they’re implementing at Reviva.

Role	Standard % of Time for CI Activity
Executives	10-15%
Value stream manager	25%
Support department managers	50%
Supervisors	50%
Team leaders	80%
Operators (associates)	95%+

“Leader standard work is a powerful tool to help leaders shift behavior to focus on the process to make the approach process-dependent and not people-dependent,” says Sawin. She contends that the entire process raises the bar for the leadership staff and helps to identify those who will and will not make the transition to more senior levels of leadership. With documents that clearly outline expected behaviors and best practices of leadership activity, Reviva has been able to create a baseline for its lean management system.

It’s no surprise that Sawin was recently promoted to a more senior role in the organization. And she’s left a behind a stable of processes for the new CI leadership to use while continuing to support the organization’s need for a sustainable lean business system.

Link Incentives to Achievement of Key Performance Metrics

Brian Frost, continuous improvement director at Appleton Papers, says that his organization linked lean success to performance metrics for the entire operations team. In their first full year implementing lean, Appleton made lean deployment 20 percent of its operations scorecard. Their metrics were closely linked to lean deployment:

- 30 percent of work force participating in an event = 10 percent bonus
- 14 kaizen events per month = 10 percent bonus
- Score 75 points on the lean assessment
- Standardization of lean tool box

Set Vision, Align Resources, and Vigorously Monitor Achievement

We really need to look at lean as a foundational element of our organization’s core business system. A lean business system is a fundamental set of processes that enable successful achievement of your most critical objectives. A lean business system must be driven by leadership and enabled by a lean culture.

Autoliv and Danaher are preeminent examples of this holistic approach. All pillars are equally balanced: people, process, plans, and performance. They’re all linked, and you must maintain balance for the system to pay off. Policy deployment is the process that translates vision into action and defines a clear set of activities required to achieve breakthrough growth. But you have to live

the policy deployment process by ensuring resources are focused on delivering those results and you must actively monitor performance in a rigorous, disciplined approach. Leaders have to insist that their teams measure and counter measure constantly in order to make it work.

Kaizen is a way of life, and we should all embrace it as our primary tool for rapidly driving continuous improvement and sustainable change. However, kaizen alone won't do the trick. Kaizen is the tool—policy deployment and managing for daily improvement are the processes that help us to deliver.

Develop Your People

Lastly, you've got to tie it all together with people. While leadership may come naturally for some, it must be nurtured in others. You've invested a tremendous amount in developing leaders with technical expertise, industry knowledge, and strong relationships. Most likely, those managers will be tapped to lead senior-level positions as your organization benefits from the continuous improvement culture. As Brent Shadix, executive vice president of human resources for WIKA Instrument Corporation says, "Anytime you want to grow from where you are to where you want to go, there are definitely certain types of leadership with certain skills that you'll need to get there. Our goal is to develop people that can manage at a different level. When you're an organization that has grown as fast as WIKA, you must be able to change your management style. As we get bigger, we need for leaders to coach, develop, and manage others."

Coaching and mentoring aren't so easy. Prioritize coaching and development for your rising stars. Give your leadership team the opportunity to recognize their behavioral strengths and weaknesses. Help them find

ways to build the core capabilities to lead and drive success.

“Understand the strengths and weakness of your organizational culture.”

Know what your employees are thinking and respond by developing leaders who can keep the ball moving further down the field.

This may be the softer side of success but it's a key ingredient. Your special recipe won't taste quite right unless you develop all the ingredients in the right mixture. Set the plan. Rigorously deploy process. Vigorously monitor results. And develop your people. Do that and you've got the secret ingredients of competitive advantage. Now that's a recipe you'll want to keep on hand. ■