

Getting your employees involved

BY HARRY ONSMAN*

ONE of the underlying themes of both Lean Manufacturing and Six Sigma is that of involving employees in the improvement of business processes. Lean, in particular, assumes that employees will be heavily involved in making activities easier, safer, cheaper, and better.

The concept of employee involvement tends to draw two types of reactions from managers. Some warmly welcome the idea of engaging and involving employees in all manner of improvement programs; others view the notion with deep suspicion and skepticism.

These two opposing views come from the widely different experiences that managers have with the involvement idea. Some have nightmare-like recollections of "quality circles" with endless meetings producing nothing much. Others have seen problem-solving teams consistently tackle and conquer major cost elimination projects.

But regardless of your personal views, the fact remains that neither Lean nor Sigma is something that managers can do on their own. Both require that managers find ways of involving employees at all levels in the organisation in the hunt for better ways of doing business. The trick is to manage the involvement process effectively, ensuring that productive outcomes are achieved.

Thankfully, we do know a lot about how to make the involvement process work. You do need to put some effort in as it doesn't manage itself. Sigma requires a lot less effort as only small numbers of people (Black Belts) can be trained, and then swung into action on major improvement projects.

Lean requires much more effort but then the payment is also more broadly based. For example, both Five S and Visual Management have strong elements of employee involvement. Five S simply will not work unless employees want to shine, straighten, sort, standardise and sustain their work areas. They have to want to do these things or it will simply fizzle out.

So managers need to learn how to "make people want to do the things that need to be done". Employee involvement is therefore no different from all the other leadership challenges that managers face on a daily basis. What is different about Continuous Improvement is that approaches like Lean Manufacturing offer a structured approach to getting people involved. Each of the Lean tools contains within it a set way of involving people.

One of the simplest starting points



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for employee involvement is simply to invite people's ideas on how to do things better, easier or safer. Again, many managers have a low opinion of "suggestion schemes" but in almost all the cases that I have seen where these schemes failed, they were badly designed in the first place and then badly managed. And managers usually do the designing and the managing!

Suggestion schemes

So how do you design a suggestion scheme as a first step in building a culture where employees contribute to improving the business? First, keep in mind some general principles:

- *focus on the small* - small ideas are usually more valuable than big ideas (easier to implement; faster paybacks; less cost to make happen; etc);

- *take action quickly* - many ideas implemented has more impact than one big idea studied for a long time; and

- *grab the advantage* - it is more difficult for competitors to copy many small ideas than one big (usually technical and purchased) idea.

Next, decide what to do about rewards because this ruins more schemes than anything else. Here are some more basic principles:

- monetary reward schemes create more problems than they solve;

- you don't want to create a culture where contributing is contingent on getting paid extra;

- you don't need to bribe people to contribute; just say "thank you" when they do;

- if it helps, you can set up a collective reward scheme where everyone gets something but reward the contri-

bution, not the gain achieved; and

- think left field eg. one of the best schemes I've seen has the employer contributing \$100 for every idea implemented to the local children's hospital.

Structurally, make contributing ideas as easy as possible and make it part of everyone's job, not something that is special or extra. Ideas can be contributed verbally but managers must make and treat the contribution formally ie. fill in a form. Do something special to prove to everyone that the process is being taken seriously. The faster you give feedback to people on ideas contributed, the more credibility the scheme will have. Tell everyone about ideas that have been implemented. Celebrate successes.

The single most effective approach to getting ideas from employees is to focus them on a particular area of activity. For example, ask everyone to make suggestions on how "delivery in full on-time" or "safety in the warehouse" can be dramatically improved by changes made in *their* area. (If you need more on how to do all this, read *Ideas are Free* by A Robinson and D Schroeder, Berret-Koehler, 2004.)

Once people are comfortable with contributing ideas, you can encourage more specialised involvement in areas such as problem-solving teams, preventative maintenance, and quality improvement. As always, it starts with management.

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