



RETHINKING HR FOR OPERATIONAL

A basis of continuous improvement and respect

BY CHERYL JEKIEL

When many organizations become disappointed with the results of their lean initiatives, they realize that developing a lean strategy consists of two elements: continuous improvement and respect for people. Each element contains significant challenges that organizations can address by rethinking HR. First, consider the difficulties faced during a lean transformation.

Achieving expanded and daily continuous improvement

The structures and strategies that seek to get beyond specific improvement



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events or to develop a lean culture have eluded many. Daily practice requires weaving lean thinking and skills into the fabric of most aspects of work.

Achieving a lean transformation through respect for people

A lean strategy involves more than having a culture that generally respects people. A true transformation requires a complete overhaul of leadership roles involving coaching teams and empowering employees to solve their own problems. Some describe this as the equivalent of turning the role of leadership upside down. Changing the role of leadership then creates additional complexities in how teams function.

How can rethinking HR make a significant difference with these challenges?

One way to engage HR team members is by having them apply lean methods to HR processes as transformation efforts become enterprise-wide. More importantly, consider how HR can help drive a comprehensive lean transformation to create value for your organization.

Exploring new ways to partner with HR on a lean transformation

Of course, it is easy to say that we need to broaden the application of continuous improvement behaviors and apply inspirational leadership. But what specific

practices can we implement by partnering with HR to create these results?

Align your entire talent strategy to the lean culture.

Culture refers to patterns of behavior or general values. Therefore, an organization's belief in lean principles needs to translate to specific individual behaviors. For example, if your organization values customers, then you may guarantee your products or services, strengthen customer service practices or focus on understanding customer needs to drive internal improvements. Kerry Courtney, HR manager for Robinson Fans, located in Zelienople, Pennsylvania, shares that her role in guiding communication is critical to its lean culture. The company explains the "why" to workers, prioritizes providing feedback and gets employees involved in making decisions to increase engagement.

How do you get started? The first step is to identify your organization's continuous improvement values and what behaviors they will drive. In addition to customer focus, lean values might also include transparency, equality, measurable improvement and extensive participation.

Next, look at what specific skills employees need to have in order to carry out those behaviors and align with your values. The specific behaviors found in the values noted above can be built in general job requirements for leadership roles and all other positions, including senior management. Thus, the way the HR department works with operations and other departments to hire, train and develop people, manage performance and all forms of recognition need to be aligned with these specific behaviors and skills you have identified.

- 1. Partner with HR to handle the newly found problem-solving capacity of an engaged workforce.** The process of getting employees to work together on interdepartmental

teams on a daily basis and empowering them to solve their own problems creates new challenges. Changes in work flow create the need to redesign how people work. How do they spend time collaborating on top of getting their prior work done? If there is more interdepartmental teamwork, when and how does that happen? If employees are solving their own problems, what changes need to be made to how work and spending is authorized to prevent bottlenecking progress? In all these areas, HR needs to support the newly formed work roles, policies and practices that are involved.

2. Increase the involvement of HR.

In order to make lean sustainable, HR must be heavily involved. People often underestimate the role of HR in driving continuous improvement, but HR has the ability to redesign work roles and support a culture that inspires performance and customer loyalty, effectively sustaining continuous improvement efforts. HR strategies cover anything related to managing talent, including hiring, training and development, performance management and recognition systems.

Melissa Smith, HR manager at McKee Foods, headquartered in Gentry, Alaska, shares that she and her team have changed how they create their yearly operational plan. While it has always taken input from all areas, the company is focusing more on the voice of the customer, especially in the areas of alignment within its workforce. This change has impacted its hiring processes and their standards for training.

3. Provide HR with a working knowledge of leadership challenges and operational excellence.

Lean requires leaders who coach, mentor and empower. We refer to

them as people-centric leaders, who inspire their teams and bring forth their skills so that they can accomplish, innovate and solve problems on their own. This creates an organization full of skilled innovators and problem solvers, rather than just a management team that handles things for their teams. Expose your HR team to benchmarking, training and other learning opportunities to build their expertise in methods related to operational excellence and the new type of leadership needed for a lean culture.

4. Encourage HR staff to apply lean methods to their internal processes.

Practicing lean methods within the workings of HR is a form of education and a way to model the culture they support to the rest of the organization. Expanding lean practices into the HR department is also an excellent way to begin to build the skills of HR professionals.

Imagine what is possible for organizations when there is a connection between people, work groups and alignment between lean and business goals.

HR as an integral part of your lean efforts will allow you to:

1. Achieve better and more sustainable results.

Many organizations are on a path to integrate continuous improvement into every aspect of their work. The problem is that they have not made the behaviors that support improvement part of their culture. A lean culture means the behaviors have become part of daily work. In driving talent strategies, HR can begin to make lean cultural. Their role is to help ensure that everything that impacts employees or team members is aligned with the continuous improvement values and culture and is people-centric.

2. Set leaders up for success.

As described earlier, leadership in lean organizations takes on a role that differs from the traditional top-down model. The job of leaders is to inspire, coach, mentor and empower their teams to understand the whole process of the work they do, to solve problems together in teams and to always keep the customer in mind. These inspirational leaders lead by coaching instead of telling, supporting and holding people accountable while allowing them to flourish freely. HR's role is in designing leadership roles that require this type of leadership and then supporting the development plans to ensure they can be successful. Organizations often need to restructure their leadership functions to align with these new ways to lead.

Jason Brandt, a regional HR manager at Tempur-Sealy, located in Avon, Indiana, shares that his organization transferred leadership from supervisors to the peer group. Leadership became a process of setting an example for others to follow rather than the traditional practice of simply telling employees what to do.

3. Expand the view of lean as a way to build capabilities in your work teams.

As teams are led differently, workers use of their skills and abilities grows. A problem-solving workforce is able to effectively collaborate on a range of processes in the work environment. Greater collaboration and exposure to more aspects of the business creates a more valuable team that is highly engaged to achieve key strategies and is focused on tending to customers. The results of these efforts include increased engagement of the workforce which can be seen in reduced costs, increased revenue and the enhancement of the human work experience. Without the involvement of HR, lean cannot be implemented sustainably and will never move beyond isolated projects and efforts into a new culture and way of thinking.

“ Consider how HR can help drive a comprehensive lean transformation to create value for your organization. ”

Following are case studies exploring the methods and results of partnering with HR for a lean implementation in two different organizations.

CASE STUDY 1:
Gemline, Lawrence, Massachusetts

Susan Kamacho, HR manager for Gemline, explained, “We started implementing lean at Gemline about 10 years ago. From an HR perspective, it has always been about finding different ways to help guide the company through the lean culture transformation.”

Reflecting values in recruiting and onboarding

Gemline’s HR department started recruiting differently and changed the entire onboarding process to incorporate the company’s continuous improvement values in the process. A questionnaire is now sent to candidates to figure out if their values align with those of the company. They’ve also moved to behavioral interviewing, interviewing candidates against the organization’s values.

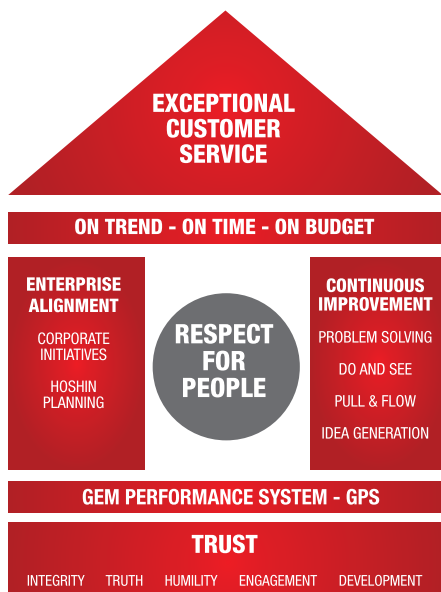


Figure 1. Gem Performance System House

New ways to view performance management

They’ve created a performance appraisal form built around the continuous improvement philosophy. The entire organization revolves around what it calls the Gem Performance System House (See Figure 1). Everything we do revolves around the values in the house. “We have two areas we’re going to be focusing on in 2017: offering more fluid feedback and putting a focus on crossover talent. I’m a firm believer that we should be providing much more fluid feedback on a regular basis throughout the year,” Kamacho said.

Creating engagement through idea generation

“We have a very strong connection between continuous improvement and engagement at Gemline, and our Idea Generation System has been the catalyst for it. Without that, we wouldn’t have as strong of an engagement level. People wouldn’t be actively looking for problems to solve the way they are today,” Kamacho explained.

“The Idea Generation System has created a highly engaged workforce with 25,000 implemented ideas in five years. We know from our yearly surveys that the level of engagement has increased, aligning with the idea generation activity.”

CASE STUDY 2: Kittias Valley Healthcare, Ellensburg, Washington

Carrie Youngblood, director of human resources for Kittias Valley Healthcare, explained that within her organization, HR’s role is easing the transition in anything that continuous improvement changes. “HR is also there making sure we partner well with every department. HR is the invisible glue of our organization, making sure that we are impacting the culture in a positive way and supporting the direction of the organization,” Youngblood said.

Improvements in hiring processes

This is where Kittias has seen the largest impact of applying A3 thinking, making things visible and involving all the appropriate stakeholders. The company has made the entire hiring process visible with whiteboards throughout the entire office and started a cross-functional “huddle” to engage in problem solving.

“We now look at having a vacancy as having something broken in the process. There is a reason we have that vacancy, so we apply problem-solving thinking and root-cause analysis across the board in our hiring process to get to the root of the problem,” Youngblood said.

A new view of leadership that drives engagement and better results

For years, a leader in the organization was the person that solved the problem and saved the day. Kittias is moving toward a new model of leadership in which leaders empower the staff to communicate problems and bring forward solutions. Of the company’s 600 employees, roughly 45 are leaders. The team realized that leaves out 555 other problem solvers.

Using A3s and coaching to strengthen leadership

The company realized that all of its high-performing employees were displaying lean leadership. “We now use an operational gemba tool with which our senior leaders go out and review how their junior leaders are displaying leadership behaviors at least once per quarter,” said Youngblood. “In HR, we take all of that data from those reviews over the year and put it into the leaders’ annual performance evaluation, which is also in the form of an A3. When a leader is not displaying those behaviors, we utilize yearlong coaching and gemba tools to be able to get to the root cause. ●

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