

Chapter 6

Domo Arigoto, Mr. Lexus!

Now I'd like to return to Lean in the workplace because, like all journeys, my Lean journey hit a rough patch. I see this everywhere I go in the manufacturing and corporate world. For some people the very word "Lean" earns a frown or at the very least a look of dread. These are the people who tried Lean and hit the same rough patch I did. This rough patch is a sign that the practitioner doesn't fully understand the comprehensive nature of Lean. My two trips to Japan over a five-year period finally gave me the full appreciation of Lean thinking and the motivation to implement it effectively.



Why isn't this working like they said it would?

In the early days of the journey, my impression of Lean was that it was a very promising business tool that would help my company expand and grow into a more efficient and sophisticated operation. Using Lean as *only* a tool will leave you disappointed. It is much more than that.

The first three months took me through a whiplash of emotions. The changes, hard as they were to accept, brought significant rewards – saving the company tens of thousands of dollars and bringing a fresh air of efficiency and simplicity to FastCap. And that was in just three months!

I felt like a new man...like I had accomplished something significant.



I've done it! Time to celebrate!

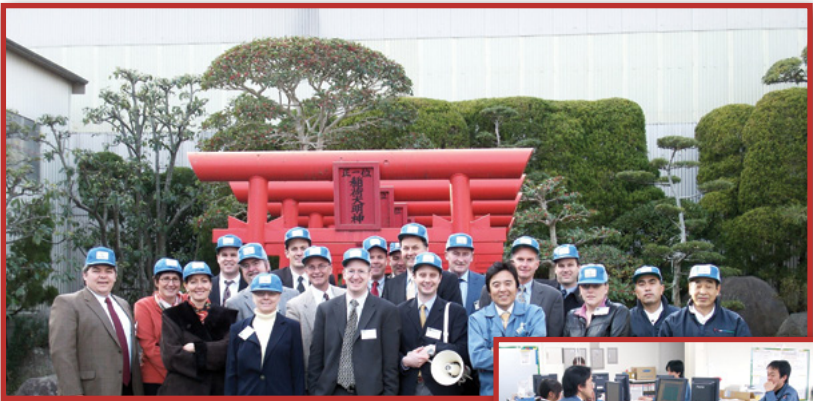
It was time for the consultants to go home, now that I knew what I was doing, right? Mmmm, not so fast!

These so-called "tremendous" changes I had undergone were actually considered very small in the eyes of my mentors. When I told them of my plans to build a larger facility, they looked at me like I was crazy. "Why?

"You have too much already!" they protested. I still didn't get it.

It was at this time that Brad and Jon suggested that I participate in a new program. I would travel with several other business leaders to Japan for an immersion training experience in Lean manufacturing. Part of the excursion included an up-close and personal orientation to the Toyota Production System (TPS). How could I say NO? Japan is The Holy Land, the mother country, of Lean thinking. Of course I said YES!

That first pilgrimage to Japan was like an avalanche of learning and inspiration. I was overwhelmed with more information and impressions



My first trip to Japan with Brad and Jon from Gemba Research.

than I could possibly process. The production facilities were institutions of efficiency and simplicity. It was like watching one person accomplish the job of ten in the cleanest, most organized spaces I had ever seen. I didn't know how I was going to relay all this new information back to my people, but I came away convinced that Lean would solve many of the problems I was having at FastCap.

When I returned I implemented more improvements and began initiating what are called Kaizen events. A Kaizen event is when a group of employees focuses on a process and



Lean from their work spaces to their manufacturing...



*These people are dialed in!
Even her coat is ironed.*

examine every step, then put it back together – removing all the non-value activity or waste. It's a team approach to making improvements.

For the next few years FastCap saw many improvements. We cut a lot of waste, simplified processes and saw our business grow steadily. I have to admit, though, Lean manufacturing started to feel like a grind. I noticed that I had become the sole driving force behind our Lean implementation. As long as I was around to initiate ideas or to lead brainstorming sessions or Kaizen events, we'd see progress. As soon as I walked away or took a business trip, things just seemed to linger where they were left. It was like pushing a train. When I meet people that have implemented Lean it is common for them to feel frustrated because they can't get Lean to really take root in their company.

I believe this may be the point at which many people give up on Lean. I am eternally grateful that I didn't give up, because what happened on my second pilgrimage to Japan was a watershed moment in how I understood the big picture. I discovered the critical missing link in my methods and why I was not able to make Lean thinking “stick.” I needed to get beyond the “doing Lean events” grind and this second pilgrimage to Japan gave me just the perspective I needed.

The highlight of this second trip was a tour of the Lexus™ plant and a two-hour lecture by the Vice-President of Lexus. The Lexus facility was one of the most elegant and fascinating models of production I had ever seen. At the



What a contrast! Stacks of batchwork before and now fast and simple one piece flow! Building just what you need when you need it. One piece flow is counterintuitive. Batchwork seems faster and more efficient but it is just the opposite. In this picture we show one of our many U-shaped Lean cells throughout our facility.



On the bus on our second tour of Japan.

end of the tour I asked the Vice President a very direct question, “What is the most important thing for Toyota?”



The most important thing for Toyota™ is people – teaching and training people in a culture of continuous improvement.

I was hoping for an answer besides the obvious, “eliminating waste through continuous improvement” response, given that those are the pillars of Lean manufacturing. I desperately needed to hear something different, something more inspiring, though I had no idea what that would be. The VP did not disappoint.

Without hesitating he said, “The most important thing for Toyota is people. Toyota is all about teaching and training people and building a culture of continuous improvement. We don’t care about the next hybrid, the next engineering marvel, not even the next sales strategy. Our number one concern is how to build our people and how to build a culture of continuous improvement.” This was hardly the answer I expected, but it was my “Eureka!” moment for the trip.

I had just spent the last five years focusing on waste and continuous improvement. Toyota, on the other hand, was obsessed with building a culture through teaching and training its people. In contrast, I was trying to convince my people to embrace Lean thinking by initiating “Lean events.” My mistake had to do with my incorrect focus on processes. I needed to focus on building a culture of people who understand and embrace continuous improvement.

My misguided, but hopeful, intent was that my employees would see this marvelous process of identifying waste and continuous improvement with the same excitement that I did. If they experienced the Lean process through my eyes, I just knew they would adopt it with the same vigor and enthusiasm. My conversation with the Lexus VP



Endless teaching, training and building a culture of continuous improvement.

made me realize that my understanding of what Lean is and how Lean works was flawed.

The problem was one of motivation. I was motivated as a business owner who wanted to see my business grow and expand successfully. Implementing

Lean principles was helping me get to that goal of a well-run company. My employees, however, were motivated by the usual things that keep people coming to work, such as a good job, a paycheck, personal satisfaction, and a sense of camaraderie with other employees. They were not necessarily motivated by my grand business plan!

Now it was clear to me that my primary task was to go home and build a culture of Lean thinking by focusing on growing people. “Building a Lean culture” was the missing link for me, and it’s why I couldn’t get the improvements at FastCap to “stick.” It’s the reason I felt like I was pushing a train. Lean is about building a culture of continuous improvement, not about conducting Lean events.

Like any other aspect of self-improvement, the hardest part is not learning how to do it. The hardest part is changing the culture, the lifestyle, so that progress is an ongoing, permanent upward course. We all know someone who lost weight or started a new positive habit like exercise, meditation or daily prayer. We also know that a year later many of these life improvements tend to drop off. We are creatures of habit. Change is an easy experiment, but a bad habit is like a jealous, abandoned mistress – constantly vying for our return!

My foray into Lean was no exception. Not only did I need to incorporate this new way of thinking as a permanent and progressive change of habit, but I needed my craftsmen, warehouse employees, shipping and packaging people, office managers and executive directors to embrace this way of thinking. I wasn’t sure how I would accomplish that, but what happened next on this Japanese pilgrimage sure pointed me in the right direction!



*On my way home with a new understanding,
new determination and a new goal.*