

## Changing cultures, one lift ride at a time!

David Shaked

I recently facilitated a two-days Strength-based Lean Six Sigma workshop at the brand new local council building in Utrecht, the Netherlands. The building was opened to business less than a year ago and in my view, it is an inspiring example of an engaging (and engaged) council. It is a well-designed building which welcomes the public (not just the employees). It projects an image of an inspiring and aspiring city.

The building has six energy-efficient lifts to carry employees and visitors to its more than twenty floors. The lifts are operated with a special destination control system. Each passenger specifies their destination floor when ordering the lift and is then told by the system which of the six lifts will take them to their destination most efficiently. It is a very sophisticated system and it surely consumes less energy but for those of us who are used to the common, basic lift, it can be confusing. The logic as to why the lift stops at certain floors is beyond the passenger. In this particular building it created frustration, impatient employees and a general story and perception about the “confusing, useless and slow” lifts. It certainly isn’t how any employee would wish to start their work day.

As part of the workshop, I asked participants to ‘go to the gemba’\*, where they observe a process, interact with the process users and try to improve the situation using the strength-based approaches covered in the workshop. As soon as I finished introducing the exercise, I was surprised to see a small group of participants quickly self-organising to go to the lifts area. I had no idea what they could do to improve the lifts in the building in a thirty-minute exercise!

When they returned, I noticed the excitement their experience had generated straight away. They took several rides in the lift with other employees or visitors, none of whom were involved in the workshop. They were able to speak to more than thirty people in half an hour. Being well aware of the existing negative sentiment towards the lifts, they still dared to ask strength-based questions such as “What has been your best experience in this lift?”, “What do you like about the experience?”, “What does it enable you to do?” and... “What would make the journey even better?” To their surprise the passengers enthusiastically engaged with these ‘unusual’ questions, sharing stories about how they enjoyed chatting to colleagues during the journey, what they thought could improve the journey experience and even how they sometimes preferred to use the stairs instead. Some passengers were so surprised by the questions, they did not have an immediate answer. But, encouraged by answers from other passengers, they shared their own views or promised to think about it.

Marieke, one of the team members, commented: *“We chose the lift because it’s such an obvious process in the building ‘shouting out’ for improvement. So in a way, we chose the hard way. And because we could actually see and experience the process and the users, we figured this would speed the solution-finding step.*

*“To be honest, it took some courage from us to start questioning in an appreciative way. It was great to ask questions as a team. It gave each of us the opportunity to listen to the person asking questions, to the answers, and to keep on the appreciative track. I experienced the powerful option to sidestep the negative connotation in the answers and focus on the possibilities within them. So – using the words in the answers, and leaving the cynicism aside.”*

In less than 30 minutes a different vibe was created: the narrative about the lift had begun changing and several innovative (yet simple) ideas were raised. I can also imagine that some passengers may

have shared their journey experience with their colleagues when they got to their destination, and inspired them to think about the lifts differently. This short intervention surely had a ripple effect in the building. Imagine what could have been achieved with a day-long exercise!!

When I compare this experience to the that of a more traditional approach to culture change and operational improvement, the differences are glaring. Traditional approaches require a prolonged data collection exercise and deep analysis before any change can be thought of, planned or initiated. With Strength-based Lean Six Sigma, change is simultaneous, engaging and creative.

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\*The practice of Gemba/Genba is expressed in English as 'go see' or 'go to the real place'. The real place is where the product is being made, where a service is being provided, or where interactions with customers are happening.

David Shaked is an independent consultant - a positive change leader for individuals, teams and organisations with over 20 years of experience. He is a practitioner and teacher of several strength-based approaches to change (such as Appreciative Inquiry, Solution Focus coaching and Positive Deviance), as well as a certified Lean and Six Sigma Master Black Belt. In his book 'strength-based Lean Six Sigma' he presents an innovative and unique approach to Lean Six Sigma. An approach that blends the rigour of process improvement through Lean Six Sigma with the energy, creativity and engagement released through strength-based change.

