

## A Fresh Approach to Process Improvement and Lean Thinking

By: David Shaked.

Years of practising business process re-engineering and Lean Thinking have taught me many lessons. Most of the improvement workshops, workout sessions and Kaizen events I have led or participated in have focused on two key objectives:

- To seek out where the process is inefficient, does not generate value to the customer or where bottlenecks exist (using Lean Thinking seven wastes for example)
- To find ways to improve them (by introducing Lean Thinking tools and techniques)

The actual implementation of these objectives can cause anxiety among people who work in the area being improved. They learn to observe how much waste is generated in their daily work, with the next logical conclusion being: "If I create so much waste and we are trying to eliminate waste here, how does that affect my job security?"<sup>1</sup> This challenge comes up in most improvement events either directly or indirectly (for example, when participants deliberately slow or block efforts for improvements or find reasons why the waste is there).

Let us take a step back here and remind ourselves of the two key principles of the Lean Thinking approach:

- Value to the customer – organisations and processes should focus on activities that deliver value to the customer.

- Flow – products and services should flow throughout the value chain without interruption

These principles are often translated into activities that focus on waste elimination and the removal of bottlenecks out of the assumption that, by doing so, we will leave behind a process that generates little or no waste and delivers what the customer wants as quickly as possible.

### But is that so?

What happens with our process a few months after the event? Have we been able to reduce the waste in a sustainable way? Has the waste re-appeared in another guise? Can we truly say that we have freed up our resources so that they can engage in activities that add value?

There is a fresh approach for driving Lean Initiatives which can potentially overcome this problem. It comes from my experience in helping organisations change and improve and a few new ideas taken from the area of organisational development. I value the traditional improvement approach described above and would like to add to it this complimentary approach.

My approach evolved from studying the current methodologies for organisational change - such as Appreciative Inquiry and System Thinking. These approaches challenged my original way of thinking about Lean and in particular, the implementation of Lean in human-based processes.

A key principle for long lasting change is the use of positive language and messages. The energy required for positive change and improvement is far more accessible when we generate hope and a compelling view of the past, present and the future. The more positive our questions and statements are, the more powerful and long lasting our improvement initiatives will be. We know that the language we use to describe our perception of the 'reality' influences the

---

<sup>1</sup> Skilled lean facilitators shift these natural concerns away from the people and towards the process in the hope that blaming a poor process design rather than the people involved would alleviate these concerns.

future we create (this is called the Constructionist Principle). As David Cooperrider, who co-created the Appreciative Inquiry methodology, states: “a constructionist would argue that the seeds of organisational change are implicit in the first questions asked. The questions asked become the material out of which the future is conceived and constructed”.<sup>i</sup>

If we take these principles into consideration when looking at the activities taking place during a typical improvement workshop, we realise that we may actually set ourselves up for failure. If we only seek out where the process is broken, how to eliminate waste and how to remove bottlenecks, we magnify the problems. The sheer nature of the questions we ask (for example, “where is the waste?”, “What isn’t working?”, “Why is the process stuck?” etcetera), and the conversations we have with the people involved in the process, influence the way people see the reality of the process and other work they are involved with. As a result, new waste and bottlenecks may actually be created and more problems emerge!

So, do I advocate ignoring current wastes and bottlenecks in the process? No, far from it! What I suggest is approaching them from a different direction. I simply assume that in every process, something works and look for ways to enhance it.

Imagine what would happen during an improvement workshop, if we asked different questions such as:

1. When has this process worked well? Can you tell me what was happening then?
2. What has been the best outcome of this process? What made it possible?
3. What do you like most about this process? When have you been most proud about your work here?
4. What is working well today? Where and when does this process deliver value to customers?

5. Where in the process are parts flowing well?
6. If you had the ability to improve this process as you wish, what would you improve first? How would the process look then?

In fact, we can go even further and conduct ‘value walks’ (more about this later) instead of ‘waste walks’.

By following a more positive and affirming line of questioning we can use the answers to create a more robust process and in an indirect way reduce or eliminate the waste more naturally as participants orient themselves to the better parts of the process. In fact, our effort to seek what is value-generating for the customer in a given process (rather than what is wasting value) will drive the people participating in the exercise to consciously or unconsciously seek ways to deliver even more value to customers. Finally, in the current economic environment when many employees are concerned about their job security and are suspicious of any efforts to ‘lean processes’, this approach will ensure wider support with longer-lasting impact and will yield better outcomes to all.

About the author: David Shaked is the Managing Director of Almond Insight, an independent change and business improvement consultancy. He is a certified Lean Six Sigma Master Black Belt. He also holds an MBA from the McCombs School of Business at the University of Texas – Austin. His areas of expertise include human-based and transactional processes, Strategic Planning, Strength-based change and Organisational Development. He can be reached at: [david@almond-insight.com](mailto:david@almond-insight.com).

---

<sup>i</sup> Appreciative Inquiry handbook by David Cooperrider, Diana Whitney and Jacqueline M Stavros. P. 8