

# **Mr. Miyagi's Lean Journeys**

By Aza Badurdeen

Lean, frustrations and wins

Copyright©2012

**You cannot sell or change content of this e-book without written permission from the author.**

The author and publisher have made every effort to ensure the accuracy of the information herein. However, the information contained in this book is distributed without warranty, either express or implied. Neither the authors nor its distributors will be held liable for any damages to be caused either directly or indirectly by the instructions contained in this book, or by the software or hardware products described herein.

All the characters, places and situations in this book are fictional.

## **Lean, frustrations and wins**

Lean journey can take you to great heights. You, your organization, entire world will be a much better place, if lean is worked out correctly. Lean may be the difference between winning Vs. losing, leading Vs. following, coping Vs. cruising. Unfortunately though, lean journey is not a “walk in a park” as they say it. You will be very lucky, if you find a guide who will know exactly what to do in every juncture of the journey. A guide who will know exactly what direction to take. You will be very lucky, if you can vaguely see a trace of a path, a foot path, which will guide you at least few steps in the correct direction. You may be never disappointed to know one fact. You will never find the highway to lean success. Simply because it is nonexistent nor being built for you.

As any journey, lean starts with a thought of where one wants to be and single step in the correct direction. Step by step one will get closer to their goals. Soon one will see a greater gap between lean followers and traditional thinkers who are going nowhere with their thinking, who are circling the same place, as if taking the same path is going to take them somewhere. Lean thinkers will widen the gap and

become the leaders of their trade. Traditional thinkers will be the followers, if they managed to exist for long enough in this very competitive business world.

I have seen many falling behind, many losing and closing their shows before they even got half way through. I have seen great lean startups, only to lose their direction in the middle of the way and eventually fall behind. I have seen some use the entire Japanese vocabulary to call their various programs, yet not to go anywhere with their business, as they never understood the main concepts behind lean manufacturing. I have seen thriving businesses with no formal knowledge of lean. I have seen some with lean knowledge and correct execution, some patience and persistence, change their fortunes. I am really honored to be a part of some of those lean journeys. Sometimes I was the captain of the lean ship, sometimes I was a laborer, sometimes I was a demanding customer and most of the times a curious observer. I am glad to share my experiences, which I have gathered over few decades, in my various roles. I am sure they might be helpful to you, if you know where you want to go.

Hi, I am Miyagi. A mere fictional person in the head of Aza, who is bringing me to life. Like me, these scenarios are fictional too. I am sixty. My hair is mostly white, where ever they are present. I have small eyes compared to most of you. My skin color is not white. I am not taller than most of you. I come from Japan. Where I spent most of my childhood. Where I love to go when I get a chance. My wife Mike tells me, we are getting older. I myself get the thought sometimes when I see my children and grandchildren. But I am energetic as usual. I know I will live longer than most of the others. I am simply happy for all the stuff I have done in my life time. I am sure I will find happiness in whatever I will do in future. Importantly I know I have to do what I do right now to the fullest, to have a happy past and a happier future.

I am living a near retired life, but without the privilege of completely retiring, mentally. My love for lean is jumping out of me some times. I cannot help it. It is my life style. Just like that. Lean is my life style. I see opportunities for improvement everywhere. Simply everywhere. Sometimes I think to myself, I should put my lean glasses away for a moment. Then I am reminded by another side of me, I am not wearing any glasses, but I have a lean mind.

Yesterday, one of my friends visited me. He was much younger to me. We have an age gap of few decades. A man towering about six foot three or something with nice hair and white skin. We met in a nearby public park where me and Miki went for a walk. He was with his kids. Two of them. Both of them were sweet. We couldn't help ourselves. We loved them instantly. We started talking about his kids and the relationship grew fast. We became friends. I learned that he owns a business. He makes sports gear, specially related to tennis, which I am not a big fan of. He has good sales and his brand, "TJ Gear" can be found in all the leading sport gear shops.

Alex, my friend came to see me for advice. This is why most of my friends come to see me, for advice, I told him laughing. What else this old person can do for a man who is much younger to me and has plenty of energy and time ahead. I told him that I am glad they think of me at least when they are in trouble. You know, I was just joking. Alex has visited me countless times with no other reason than just to see me and see how I am doing. Besides his kids love to visiting us.

Alex couldn't help himself, started laughing. We spoke about his kids and his family. We spoke about the current economic troubles and how they are affecting the business.

I invited Alex to have a cup of tea. While my wife, who knows Alex well, pours him a cup of tea, we started talking. So Mr. Alex tell me what is your issue (I used call everyone Mr. Mrs. Or Miss even when they are my very close friends. They have told me countless times not to. But I couldn't help it. It naturally comes to me. So I use it. In return almost every one of my friends started calling me as Mr. Miyagi. This is how I became Mr. Miyagi). Alex leaned back, and told me, he is trying to implement lean manufacturing in his manufacturing facility. But he is running into some problems. I remember about a year ago, I gave him some insights on lean. Alex was delighted to experiment with lean. He spoke about lean passionately whenever we met. But I felt bad when I thought I never paid him a visit, at least to play the observers role. If I have done it, Alex may not be here today with a problem. Anyway, past is past. Nothing can be done now. I have to help him. So Mr. Alex what is the problem you are facing. How far have you gone in lean? What are you trying to achieve with your lean implementation?

Mr. Miyagi, some of my employees are not getting the lean concepts into their heart. They think lean as a burden. They are simply happy to work the way they used to. It is affecting the business. It is losing momentum. I am worried. I have seen some improvements with the changes we have made. I am sure there are many more improvements I can make in our journey to become the best mass market tennis gear manufacturer. But everything seems to be slowing down.

How many employees do you have Mr. Alex. I have about 100. OK. Give me more information. What did you do, or what did you change with your lean movement. Well, I created a value stream map. In fact I created two of them. One for the current status and one for the future. Then we aligned our plans with our target of becoming the best mass market tennis gear manufacturer. We used a Hoshin map for this. Then we derived our plans and started executing them. We identified wastes, and then we started removing them from the system. Back then everyone seems to be happy. We reduced our lead times by about 30%. Our inventory went down by nearly 20%. But somewhere it started stagnating. Now we are not moving forward.



I was listening to Alex, with no interruption. I was genuinely impressed with the knowledge he has gathered on lean in one year. I am sure he is into this big time. It is good. You should have fire inside you to make lean work. How do I know? By experience. I told Alex to give me two more days, just to think about it. I have a habit of delaying the process initially. I feel this will help me to make better observations. After few days of the meeting, emotions involved in the conversation will be long gone, and we will be in a neutral position to start with. This I believe is very important in any form of consulting. You should be very careful not to be taken away by emotions, yours or the others. When emotions come into analysis or decision making, realities are not visible, clear truth becomes blurring, ultimately making headways to wrong decisions. Alex agreed, and he understood the value of giving me some time before taking this any forward. Meanwhile we had some more tea. Alex just loves tea as much as I love it. We then switched to other topics from our personal lives to sports to international politics. We discussed many things for hours before finally Alex reminded himself that he has made a commitment to his wife to take her out for a dinner. He rushed to the door,

said good bye to my wife Miki. I will see you soon Mr. Alex, I told him. He smiled, said sure and added Good Bye Mr. Miyagi, keeping a very long pause after Mr. in his customary way. I laughed.

After Alex left, I was thinking about what Alex told me. He seems to be very much aware of what he needs out of his business. He's got good understanding of lean concepts. An organization with 100 people is not huge. Communication might not be a big problem. The results he told me were not ordinary either. I will take 30% reduction of lead time and 20% reduction in inventory any given day. I have seen people making 10% reductions in their inventory in the first year of lean implementations. I thought that is a very good result to have. Is Alex expecting too much? I doubted. After wondering for a while, I went for a nap. I know my brain will stack every piece of information in the correct order. I know it will work on this for the next two days. I am sure to have better understanding of the situation when I meet Alex next time.

Meanwhile I got some calls from my friends and old clients. My grandchildren were online via Skype. I am seeing them

growing in front of my eyes. I am thinking to myself what technology has done for us today. In a way all this technology has made us that much closer. We are living in a tiny world, where it takes only few seconds to see or hear anyone. But with that the magic has disappeared. We see everyone when and where we want to see them. No more waiting, no more surprise. If this was twenty years back, I will have to be with my grandchildren to see them. That will be a big event. I will see the effect of the magic of time on my grandchildren. I will wonder how much they have grown after I saw them last. But not today. I am not against the technology. May be I am too old to understand it.

I am geared up to meet Alex at his manufacturing facility. I have never been there before. I am a punctual person. I want to be just on time, in where I am supposed to be, doing what I am supposed to be doing to help my client. Sounds familiar? Yes, this is JIT of my life.

I called Alex yesterday and arranged to meet him at 9 am. I got into the taxi and we navigated to the Alex's manufacturing facility. When I entered the facility, where there was no one in the reception (but there was a

reception). It looked to me receptionist has gone to get some coffee or something. I am sitting on the big red couch on the reception and waiting for someone. I am hearing the phone ringing continuously. Within a minute a young lady, may be the receptionist, raced to the desk and picked up the phone. And she received few calls and in the first instant she could notice me, she smiled at me and asked “May I help you sir?”. Yes, I am here to meet Alex. Ohh. OK. You must be Mr. Miyagi. Alex asked me to send you straight to his room. Please come with me. She takes the lead. I am following her. She stops and points me to a room. Mr. Miyagi, this is Alex’s room. He is in his room. I can see Alex in his chair. I thank the lady and heading towards the room. I am kind of surprised by the helpful nature of the young lady. I have seen how some of the help staff, including people on help desk can be not so helpful. And I was thinking how good a first impression she might be making on customers when they visit here or even over the phone. The first impression means a lot. She called me Mr. Miyagi. Did she used the Mr. part as a in the normal case, or did Alex told her specifically speak to me with a Mr. I am wondering as I stand in front of the office door and knocked it. Alex was on the door in a flash. He opened the

door and invited me in. He was very happy to see me. I was in a good mood too. I asked Alex how the things are. He replied, things are going OK. I hope it would be better starting right now he added.

I can see number of charts on Alex's office. Among them are some process charts. Some efficiency graphics. Some output charts. Some cause and affect diagrams. You have done a good job in keeping track of all the necessary things Alex. He looked at some of them and smiled. Yes, I think so. He replied.

Now I want to know more about the business and good and bad and not so good. I do it my way. I start a general conversation about the organization. I lead it to the areas I feel important. I takedown all the required stuff on a note pad. But I never ask direct questions. I have learnt over decades when you ask questions like "What is the problem with this process?" you will get almost the same answer everywhere. People will tell you what they think is the problem. Sometimes they might be correct. But my experience has told me otherwise. They are wrong most of the times. That is not their fault. If I get a wrong answer, I

may not be asking the correct questions. Or I may be not be asking the correct person. But I have decided, asking direct questions itself is the problem. So I use this indirect method. I take them through a journey while noticing what I feel important. This way I can take out all the biasness and understand the process better. After all, as a consultant it is my duty to get to the root causes of the problems and finding solutions. If they know all the problems and answers why should they come to me?

I started the conversation. Alex, who are your customers? We have several customers; most of them are main sports gear sellers. We have about 12 of them as our permanent customers. We do some sales online. It is picking up. And we do sell sometimes directly to the customers, who come here. Alex replied. So you have basically retail and large volume businesses? "Yes", Alex replied. Good. Then who are your vendors. Where do you get your raw material from? In a moment Alex turns his computer to me and shows a list of about 30 vendors. They are nicely categorized by the purchase volume. I ask another question. Alex replies. This goes on for few minutes. By now I have a good understanding of the business Alex is in. I understand his

customers, vendors, audit results and so on. I have created a good launching pad.

I asked Alex to show me the value stream maps they have done. Alex walks me to a glass wall in his office where there are two maps hanging. He explains me what the process was before and what they are going to be in future. I am certainly impressed in the manner they have been done. I asked Alex who did these. He replied he did it with his senior management team. Good, I tell him and stare at the maps for a moment.

Then Alex takes me to the shop floor where they make their stuff. I see a nice work cell like work environments. I see very less inventory in the work cell or between them. I see a place where there seems to be higher inventory. Alex walks there while I was still thinking about it. He asks what is wrong, and why there is so much of inventory. He tells the workers, the expected level of inventory is only 5 pieces per workstation. Workers explain that they had a minor breakdown in the machine, pointing to a machine, and they have fixed it now. Inventory had been piling up while the machine was taken care of. Alex tells the workers it is not the expected behavior.

Instead of piling up inventory, they should stop work and focus on getting the machine repaired. People in the work cell agree and try to give some excuses. But Alex was to the point. He says if there is a break you have to stop. Then he checks the maintenance records. He notices some problems with the schedule maintenance. He calls a guy from the mechanical department, asks why this machine was not maintained as per the schedule. The mechanic gives a reason. Alex says it cannot happen again. Workers go to their work stations. Alex returns for me.

I was standing only couple of steps behind Alex. I saw the entire incident clearly. I cannot explain how excited I am. How much of knowledge Alex has acquired in this short period of time. I have seen some people learning lean manufacturing from books. But some never take it into their hearts. But Alex was living lean. In my entire career, I have seen only a handful number of people with the understanding Alex has. I was very impressed. But meanwhile I was puzzled too. Why this guy has a problem with his lean implementation? I see a very mature lean manufacturing facility in front of my eyes. Everything is managed visually. There are no many gimmicks, colorful LCD panels, LED



displays, hundreds of boards and posters. But yet everything was very much visually managed. As a complete stranger, I can walk into the manufacturing facility and see where the problems are. I can check whether there is a delay in one workstation. I can see whether I have excess inventory in the raw material section or in the finished products section. Simple red flag in the workstation calls the attention of a supervisor, who may attend the workstation without disturbing the workers and try to solve the issue immediately. Everyone seems to be relaxed. Everyone seems to be enjoying the work they do. Even though Alex was firm with his people, he wasn't seemed to be an unpleasant guy. People in the factory seem to be talking to each other, which always show the things are moving well.

I am following Alex and questioning him where I have a doubt. I am thinking about the possible improvements. I am taking down notes. I draw some layouts and pictures. We go from one station to the other. After spending the good part of the day with Alex, I am ready to leave now. When are you coming back to seem me Mr. Miyagi? asks Alex. I reply him

saying I will come to see him in two days. Next time I will just roam the factory myself, I tell him. He agrees. We say good bye to each other and walk away. On my way back home, I think about the problems Alex might be facing, but nothing comes to my mind immediately. Why this lean implementation getting stagnant. What makes it not to move forward?

I am in the Alex's manufacturing facility again. I am here exactly after a week. I did some homework since I was here last time. This time I am just going to observe the facility and attend meetings with the workers and even going to go for lunch and tea with them. I asked Alex to not to come with me as it can create some distance between me and the workers. They may not act in the same way they would if Alex was there.

I spent the first full day in the facility. I was there until the last employee left the office. Alex came to me and asked about the progress. I showed him some notes I gathered and discussed some of the points. Then I left the work place with Alex and I will come tomorrow to do the same thing. On our way back Alex says "Genchi Gembatusu". What is that? I

asked Alex. He started laughing. I thought this is a Japanese word. Wasn't that what you did today, called. Ohh.. I see. It was like Greek to me. Believe me I did not understand either word you said. It should be pronounced like "Genchi Genbutsu", I pronounce the word the correct way. Alex laughed and said; now it sounds Greek to me. We both laughed, and I tell Alex, Mr. Alex, you see if you want to take anything to your soul, you have to do it in your mother language. I always think in Japanese when I think about things closer to my heart. Same way, if you want to communicate something effectively so that others will take it to heart, you should do it in plain English. Just call this "Observation". Alex seems to agree.

The second day began with the breakfast with workers. It continued the same way like the previous day. Now workers start to talk to me. They ask me where I am from and what I am doing here. I tell them the truth. I am in a work cell. A worker puts the red flag in his table. Supervisor is there in a minute. A problem. Good thing to happen. I think to myself. The supervisor asks what the problem is. The worker has a problem with his machine. It is not working correct. Supervisor inspects the issue and decides he cannot do the

work himself. He asks the mechanics to come. They come there in a minute. They fix the machine, oil it and polish it. They update a record on the whiteboard and goes back to their workstation. Work as usual.

In another place few people have gathered around a worker. They seem to be doing some sort of an interview with the worker. They all wear a kind of a uniform and looks like in mid-twenties. I observe them from a distance. The worker is not keen to answer them. But he does nevertheless. Once they leave, I ask the worker who they are. He tells me they are the members from the “lean team”. Lean team, I asked him again. Yes, “Lean Team” from STAT Lean consulting firm. The worker replies. For the first time, I see a problem with the lean implementation here. For the first time I get evidence of people have no interest in lean. Or at least one person is not very enthusiastic about lean.

Day three. I am going through my routine. I am with the workers. Today I get to attend a meeting. This meeting is conducted by Alex. All the employees are in the meeting. It was a prescheduled meeting which will happen every Thursday in the morning for fifteen minutes. Alex will update

the users with the latest status of the business. Alex tells about some drops in the predictions. But nothing to worry he says. We will get good business in future. We are working with some big sport gear sellers. So we should be fine. Workers including manager show some comfort.

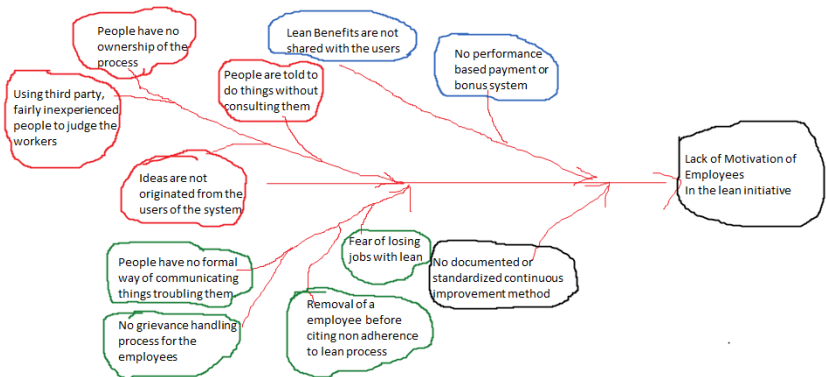
He tells about the change he is going to make to the shop floor. He is going to change the work cell layout. He adds, this was to facilitate the free movement of the trolleys carrying stuff. It will also lower the travelling time, he says. It is a waste we attack with the lean manufacturing initiative. Workers show no emotions. He adds few lines about the changes in the global economy and how it has affected them. And he thank the workers for working hard. Exactly after fourteen minutes and thirty seconds after the meeting began, everyone goes back to their work areas. Yes I had a stopwatch in my hand and I timed it. I wanted to know how punctual the meeting was. I took many notes while the meeting was taking place.

Friday is here. I am working with the Alex's team. They treat me as one of their coworkers. I have built a good relationship with them. Throughout the day, I talk to them. I ask subtle

questions. I ask them how the layout change will affect them. Some say it won't make any difference to them. Some say it will actually be counterproductive. One point out to me the possibility of increase in distance between work cells and the additional handling might come from it. Some say it will actually be a good thing. Everyone had an opinion. No body speaks a word about it in the meeting. Interesting. I think to myself.

In the tea break, they employees seem to be very relaxed, partly because it is the Friday. In addition they seem to like me. They like the fact I talk to them. I laugh when they joke. I share their emotions. I am not pretending. That is my nature. They like it. They talk to me more. They tell me stories. They tell me things happened here in the past. They tell me about their families. They tell me how long they have been working here. I tell them about Japan. I tell them about my childhood in Japan. They listen to me with great interest. Some of them tell me I have a funny accent. I tell them to talk in Japanese so that I can judge their accent. They laugh. I laugh. We are having a good time.

The day and the week ends, so is my notebook. It is almost ran out of space. I think I can give some input to Alex. But I want to put it in a more logical manner. So I draw a simple cause and effect diagram. I want to focus on his main worry for the time being.



Everyone has left the workplace. It is kind of scary to be in this place once everyone leaves and most of the lights are turned off. Alex talks to me in his office. Alex wants to talk to me after everyone has left. So I slowly walk to his room. Alex

is still sitting in his chair, staring at the computer. He is preparing some documents. He stops to talk to me. For him it seems to be the most important thing at the moment. I tell him how productive last few days were. I show him my cause and effect diagram. He looks little nervous. He looks at it for about two minutes, before turning to me. He was not surprised. His eyes tell me, "I knew all these. But I wanted the verification from a third party".

"This is great work" he tells me. It is amazing how you have captured, processed and simplified causes to this issue. I am really thrilled. I know he was not that much thrilled. Although he wants to feel that way, I believe something was stopping him. I can surely say it is the feeling of guilt, which blocks his enthusiasm. He knows he could have done better. He knows he should never have fired Joe citing non adherence to lean as a cause. He knows he never wanted to hear much from his employees. He knows if he did get their involvement, this process would have gone much better. But he asks me "Mr. Miyagi what shall we do about this?" I waited for a moment and asked him to take a photocopy of my cause and effect diagram. He goes to the photocopier and takes a copy of the diagram. I tear the page where I drew my diagram. I give it to



Alex, saying “Mr. Alex, keep this with you. Just have a look at this tomorrow morning. Do not try doing anything. Just leave it. Let your brain do the work for you. You will come with the answer to your own question. I will meet you next Monday to hear the answer.”

“Why did you tear the page off your book? I could have kept the photocopy”, tells me Alex. I tell him, “this in color. Color images are easy to memorize”. He smiles and puts the diagram in his bag. We both leave the office in a moment. We go to have a coffee and talk for about an hour. Alex then drops me home. We are off to enjoy the weekend.

For me the weakened is slower than it used to be. When I was working full time, weekends seems to fly. I thought Saturdays and Sundays had few hours less than the usual working day. But it is all different now. Weekend seems much longer. But I still like them. I talk to Miki, for hours and hours. My grandchildren show up online. I talk to them for hours. I eat a very slow lunch and a dinner. We go shopping together. Some days we go to a movie. Some days we just sit on a park bench and watch young and old, rich and poor,

happy and sad pass by. It makes us appreciate what we have got. I believe I am living the perfect life.

It is 5.30 am. I am up. I welcome the day and the week by saying “Good Morning Monday”. Miki was already up. She is doing her business in kitchen. I take the steps to downstairs. I feel good energy and sense of comfort. I had a nice breakfast and by 7.45 I am out to see Alex in his office. My appointment is at 8.30. Today I am in no rush. I slowly get in to a cab. Tell driver the place where I want to go. While he is taking me there, I wonder what might be these busy people might be thinking now. There are hundreds of thousands out there on the roads. All of them are rushing to their work. But I wonder how many of them really rush to their workplace mentally. Let alone rushing, how many of them might have left their minds elsewhere. How many people might be saying to themselves, “Ohh, it is a Monday again”. When I really think about it, I have never felt this way, except once or twice in my life. I always loved what I was doing. Or better to say, I did what I liked, always. So I was happy always. I never got huge salaries in the beginning, and I couldn't afford many luxuries my friend could. Some of my friends thought I was nuts. But I knew money is not everything. Unlike all the

others who knew that, I start living that life. I found joy and peace of mind.

While I am feeling good about myself, I am near the Alex's place. I can see his factory nearing. I looked at my clock. It is 8.25 am. I am five minutes early.

I am walking to Alex's office. He is in his seat. He is turning on his computer. He gave me a big good morning just as he saw me. Good Morning Mr. Alex, I reply him. Without wasting a second, I asked him, what answers to your questions are. He was not surprised, not panicked and did not hesitated even for a moment. He answered, "Mr. Miyagi, you were correct. I have made all those mistakes. Whatever on the cause and effect diagram are the causes to the issue. I think we can correct them, step by step obviously. I will start making the simple changes first. I am thinking of starting with improving the worker involvement in the lean process. For the moment I think we should keep our consultants too. It is too early for us to lose them. But what I thought of doing is to form an internal lean team. People from every department will have a representative in this team. They will identify, brainstorm and come up with the best solutions. But I will have the

ability to bypass all their decisions in case I believe their decision may not be aligned with the long term objectives of this business”.

Alex did not leave a single space for me to disturb him. He was doing all the talking, I was just listening. I am really pleased and happy about the solutions he has thought of. I especially like the idea of creating a lean team from the members of the business. Mr. Alex, great, you have thought through the issue really smartly. I agree with all your ideas. “Mr. Miyagi, I thought you might not agree with the bit me bypassing the team in case I wanted to.” Alex tells me. I do think it is important to guide teams to the correct decisions. Sometimes, a team may not be able to see the vision you have in your mind as clearly as you do. Sometimes a team may select the easy path. In these cases, you may have to exercise your power, even if it meant overriding the team decision. But one advises. Do not exercise this immediately. Let the team to mature. Alex agrees. “Yes, absolutely” he says.

So how are we going to setup the team? “I will ask the department managers to come for a meeting and then will

decide on the candidates from each department. I am thinking about giving the team members a 5% increase in the salary as a measure to motivate them to put the extra effort” Alex tells me.

It makes me to think. Alex, I think increase in their salary is not a good idea. When this team gets money for driving lean, it separates them from the team their representing. Others in their departments will see these people just like they see the external consultants. In addition it will start some salary increment related discomforts among the other members too. As the cause and effect diagram says, people think they are not getting their share of lean benefits. Last thing you will need is a small set of people involved in lean to get more money. I speak continuously. Alex keeps listening.

“This is what age does to people. NO. NO, I did not mean in a negative way Mr. Miyagi. You have tons of experience. I believe you are right. Paying them might do more harm than good. Thank you for pointing out that to me.” So how many people do you think you are going to have in your team? “About 12” replied Alex immediately. Mr. Alex, it is not good. Too many people in a team can cause problems. It is too

difficult to communicate and come to conclusions easily. You will have to see a way of reducing the team to about 7 people.

“That is going to be tuff. I have to include all the senior VPs and a representative from each department. ” Said Alex. Well I understand your point. But how about creating two teams? One to set the strategic directions. This team will be your senior VPs and you obviously. Then there will be an operational team. This team will make your goals come true. How does that sound? “Mr. Miyagi, you are a master at this. How can I refuse your suggestions? Let this be that way.” I am about to give my last piece of advice for the day to Alex. Mr. Alex, do not appoint your teams today. Leave it to the next week. Meanwhile do your homework. Think about what exactly your team should do. I know you have a very good overall idea. But you have to be specific when you communicate with your team. Think about what are the powers you can give that team. You see a team without any formal form of power might not be able to perform well. This will lead to frustrations among the team members. You will have to think about how this will affect your day to day operations. Think through them. And prepare to pitch your

idea. Practice before you talk to your team. Try to talk to the hearts of the people, while giving some logics for their brains to work on". "I get the point" says Alex. I am thinking in the same lines. He added.

I am done for the day. One of the advantages of being a consultant is that you can define your working day. This may not apply for everyone. But in my case it surely is. I left Alex and heading back home for lunch. Alex, a guy with lots of business experience and lean knowledge can pull this out on his own. I am sure of it.

Today is Tuesday. I am up early as usual. I am thinking about my schedule for the day. Then I am going through the day to day routine. My phone starts ringing. It is Alex. He is going to speak to his team today. He thought he had enough thinking done already. He thinks he has to finish the first step fast. OK, I tell him. I am little nervous about the speed at which he is traveling. But if Alex is confident, then it should be fine. At the end of the day it is his business. So I speak to Alex for some time. Alex invites me to the team creation activity. I explain him to why I should not be there. And he understands and proceeds.

Few hours later I get another call from Alex. He was very satisfied about how things went. He tells me that everything has gone according to the plan. Both of us are really pleased.

A month went by. My activity planner tells me, I have to do some following up with Alex. Although Alex has spoken to me in-between, I have to do a formal study with Alex. That is how I know exactly everything is working fine. So I meet Alex and have a chat with him. I asked him the obvious question "Mr. Alex, how is your business doing? How is lean going on?" Alex replies me with a smile in his face. Everything is going good Mr. Miyagi. People are involved much more now. They are starting to feel lean is beneficial for them too. This probably is the most important thing that has happened after the meeting we had. In addition, our two teams are working well. We had some good suggestions. We implemented few of them. Things are going good. Alex is speaking with joy and pride. I feel it through his words and expressions. I am happy to hear how things are going. But I have to complete my job. So I tell Alex, I will stay observe the work for the entire day today just like I did before. Alex couldn't understand why I should do it. But he did not object my request.



I am in the factory floor. Observing people and the work they do. I have a new notebook to record all these. But I have my old notebook with me too. This will help me to compare the before and after statuses to evaluate the improvements taken place.

I can notice few new charts replacing the stuff which was there already. These new boards are much more meaningful I believe. They are simple directions, only one or two of them, put down in big bold letters with measurable outcomes. For an example one such board says “Improve flow, Reduce Stoppages. We will clean our machines 3 times every day”. Unlike charts overwhelm people with so much of data; these simple and clear directions are much more effective.

I can observe some minor changes to the layouts in the factory. I see some empty spaces which I like. I was having casual chats with people around the factory floor and management. They all tell me more or less the same thing. They all tell me they start to like the concepts of lean. They tell me that they start to see some of the benefits already. So they tell me they are motivated by this. I think they are honest opinions, but I have to validate them before I accept

them. All the consultants should do some sort of a validation to get to a correct conclusion, I believe.

I am taking lunch with one of the workers in the factory. This person is about 35 years old and used to talk to me when I was here a month ago. His name is Andrew. Andrew was happy with lean developments too. He says “Alex, made us understand the value of the lean practices. We have to build good quality stuff with fewer resources just to in the game. If we do not do this, we will be history. So I see why we should do lean and I see how we are going to do it. Importantly I know what our role is in the process”. Andrew tells his honest opinion about the lean movement and he talks with some passion, which is a really good sign. I casually asked him “what improvements you think make this process more efficient?” he thought for a moment. “I believe everything is going fine. But if I would like to see some improvements in the HR department and finance departments, you know people who are servicing us. It is not streamlined properly with the lean movement as I can see it. Probably these departments too have to start using the lean tools. We can get our work done quickly” said Andrew. I was very nervous when Andrew started talking saying he thinks everything is

fine. I have seen many people tell the same in my lean career. Most of the times this happens when shop floor people stop thinking, thinking the thinking is the business of the bosses. This is a lean killer. When people stop thinking, lean stops. But I was happy as soon as he said “BUT”. BUT is a good word in lean, especially when it is used in connection with ideas. It always leads to new ideas, new opinions. I am happy to see Andrew has an eye on the big picture. I agree in principle, we should drive for a lean enterprise not for a lean manufacturing movement. Meanwhile, I have heard this cry when the lean is at its infant stage at any organization.

Lean by very nature comes first to the manufacturing and then spreads to the other departments. So people in manufacturing see others are not following lean. So they complain. But that is nothing wrong with it. As a consultant my job is to note all these concerns and direct actions to address them. But as a consultant I have seen the value of not trying to address all the concerns at once, and sometimes not at all. All the cries are not relevant to the process. While all the concerns are valid, when it comes to action, you have to be very careful what to prioritize, and what to neglect, obviously with valid reasons. Trying to satisfy everyone with

a concern will just create issues in the system. And it is a waste.

At the end of the day, I have a good idea about the results of the actions taken by Alex. I believe they are in general very fruitful. People start to feel lean. They are starting to live it. But obviously, there are few areas where things can improve. One of them was how lean is implemented. Yes, now I believe is the time to think about how lean is implemented.

I see Alex after everyone left the office. Alex seems to be relaxed and happy. So am I. Mr. Alex, you are doing great in implementing lean. I can see the improvement in front of my eyes. I am really happy about it. “Mr. Miyagi, I cannot explain in words how much it means to me. I worked so hard to make this happen. You were the magic formula. I owe all the success to you”, words are pouring out with passion and joy from Alex. I am really happy to see it. I kept silent for a while, and tell him, I am very happy about it. And I start to talk about pull system concept in lean.

Alex understands the pull concept inside out. He speaks with great knowledge. After a little pause, I ask him, “Mr. Alex, are you following pull system in your work?” Alex looks

confused. He stands up and shows me the Kanban cards and small trays which carry semi-finished goods on the factory floor, pointing to them through his glass cubical. “Mr. Miyagi, obviously we do follow pull, see the Kanban system we have in place. It has reduced our WIP considerably. I am sure you notice it yourself too” he says. Yes Mr. Alex, I see the improvement. I am very happy about it. But my question was, “Are you following pull?”. “What do you mean? I am not clear. I do not work in the factory floor?” Alex tells me. His voice has changed. His facial expressions show me some discomfort and dissatisfaction. I tell him, “Mr. Alex, you are not a factory floor worker. But you are a working on an important role here. You are the big boss of the organization. You are a very important person. So you too have to practice pull”. “I understand all that. Please tell me what you want to tell me. I am losing my patience” Alex tells me. I really can see him losing patience. So I add, Alex, you are still pushing lean to your workers. They are happy still, but soon they will start to rebel against it. You have to make lean implementation a pull. Users have to come and tell you lean improvements they need and how to improve the process etc. In current status if you stop pushing lean today, I am

sure people will forget lean in a month or so. So this model of lean implementation will not sustain in long run.

“Mr. Miyagi, we came up with the teams to drive these functions here, one month ago, with your advice. Now just after a month, you are coming here and telling me a completely a different story” says Alex with a higher tone. His finger is pointing to me, like to say I am the culprit. This meeting is becoming hot. But I want not to lose my cool. I tell Alex, “Mr. Alex, yes, we did all that. Those moves have started to pay dividend, aren’t they? What I am telling you is not that”, “Then what the \*\*\*\* are you telling me to do?” for the first time in the conversation Alex burst out, and I can perfectly understand why. I have taken him through a journey and now I tell him that he needs to do something different. This should make him unhappy. But he has not clearly understood what I want to tell him. Probably my not so good English is playing a part here. Or it may be the way I put it. That’s all history.

“Mr. Alex, I perfectly understand your frustration. I believe you have not understood what I want to tell you. I am basically telling you to get out from the day to day affairs and

let users themselves run the lean initiatives. In case if they need any direction or approval from you, let them come to you. Yes, you should have an eye on the progress and you should align everything to what you want to achieve. But you should do it passively when it comes to operational level stuff. Let your VPs and other management with the users to navigate their way through. You have other things to consider now. How to get your suppliers involved in the lean movement and how you can build a competitive advantage over your competition and so on.” there is a long pause. I did not want break it. It took a minute, before finally Alex broke the silence. With much a calm voice he starts talking. “Mr. Miyagi. I am sorry. I should have never spoken to you that way. Anyway, what you are suggesting is not doable. If I lose control.. How can that possible..” I tell him “Mr. Alex, I have been through much tough situations in my career. I have no problems. But let me remind you, you are not going to lose control at your level. You will never be able to control everything anyway. Your team needs some freedom. Give some freedom to them to make their decisions and improvements and you will see how much of a freedom and value you get in return. Just trust me and do it.” Alex thinks

about a moment. OK, let's see, he says. We discussed about how to make the changes. And then Alex, prioritized things he has to do in order to facilitate this change. We agreed to meet in a month to check the progress.

I am on my way home. I am more than happy with the outcome. I am sure Alex will pull it off.

---

**THE END**

---

**If you enjoy, please do me a favor. Please follow the link below and share your comments. Please tell the world you liked this story by clicking on the "Like" Button.**

<http://www.learnleanblog.com/2012/09/lean-story-ebook-free-download.html>