

ANALYSISMANAGEMENT

Front line leaders key to creating lean success

BY TIM MCLEAN AND ANTHONY CLYNE*

SEVERAL years ago I read some research that indicated that the average production employee believes around 40% of what their manager tells them.

However they believe around 85% of what they are told by their immediate supervisor.

Front line leaders go by many titles; they can be called supervisors, co-ordinators, leading hands or team leaders.

The typical front line leader has direct responsibility for up to 20 employees.

Hour by hour production scheduling, expediting of urgent jobs and tracking down material shortages is often a major part of the role of the front line leader.

When lean is implemented

In our experience the implementation of lean enterprise approaches in a plant can cause a profound change in the role of the front line leader.

Pull systems such as Kanban systems will ensure that materials are replenished as they are used; level production, one piece flow and simple scheduling tools ensure that the next job is presented to the operator as they complete the last job.

Standard work ensures that work is done in a consistent manner and at a consistent rate. Suddenly the front line leader no longer needs to tell his people what to do next or search for materials.

While all these changes may sound great, lean produces a whole new set of challenges.

Eliminating waste between workstations means that problems surface more quickly.

The front line leader now becomes a coach focusing on how his team are



Here, production load levelling boards simplify the management of a plant, but lead to fundamental changes in the role of front line leaders.

playing the game.

Are the team completing work within the target times? Why is the operator at station three unable to complete her work in time? Is inventory building up at any point in the process where it shouldn't be, and if so, why? Is production stopped because of a breakdown or a quality problem at one workstation?

Previously inventory buffers would mean these problems may get fixed without anyone noticing. Now these problems will quickly disrupt or even stop the flow of production.

The front line leader finds him/herself watching how the team are doing their work and responding to their needs of his team as problems occur.

Problem solving

Traditionally the front line leader will act as the "expert", coming in to solve problems and then leaving to go to the next crisis.

This is great for their indispensability and their ego, but prevents the organisation from learning from the problem and ensures the problem will

occur again.

Structured problem solving techniques then become an important tool for the front line leader to work with his/her team to identify the root cause of problems and then apply the "plan-do-check-act" cycle to ensure a permanent fix.

It takes considerable discipline on the part of the front line leader to resist the temptation to do a quick fix.

Choose leaders carefully

A key start point is ensuring that you have the right people leading your teams.

A good front line leader needs to thoroughly understand the production process. While detailed process knowledge may be optional for a manager it is mandatory for a front line leader.

To be useful to his/her team the leader has to understand their jobs. By helping the team members the leader becomes highly respected and valued.

The individual also needs to be motivated to improve the business. Finally the front line leader needs basic leadership skills such as a willingness

to listen, honesty, confidence, a good work ethic, organisation skills, decisiveness and patience.

These are entry level leadership positions and so Barack Obama's presentation skills and Jack Welsh's business acumen are not required, but it helps if the individuals are not chronically shy, abusive, dishonest, or bone lazy.

Develop your leaders

Throughout the lean transformation management must provide their front line leaders with coaching, support and development.

This means regular two way communication (not just demanding things), assistance with more intractable problems and training and development.

In our experience, adult learning and development happens best in the workplace, through a development program around the lean implementation in the plant by coaching the front line leaders and their manager.

This means that the front line leaders are completing their part of the lean implementation program, such as implementing 5S in their area, running problem solving meetings or maintaining a Kanban system while at the same time learning how to lead their team through change.

In doing this they gain expertise in making change in their area and adapt their approach to the new way of doing things in their lean plant.

Not all leaders make the change successfully, so you need to be prepared for some casualties, but with the right development and support your front line leaders can be the keys to success in making your operation lean.

* Tim Mclean and Anthony Clyne are from TXM – Total Excellence in Manufacturing 03 96078241 or visit www.txm.com.au.