Lean Government: A Shingo Legacy?

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In the spring of 1989, Shigeo Shingo addressed the 14th annual Productivity Conference at Utah State University. On this occasion there were seven hundred persons, mostly academics, assembled to hear Dr. Shingo describe poka-yoke and SMED.

Shingo had just received an honorary doctorate from the Utah State College of Business, and had in turn bestowed his name upon the North American Shingo Prize, an award recognizing those companies who have successfully implemented the concepts and techniques of the Toyota Production System.

Today the Shingo Prize is highly regarded, but in 1989, few persons knew of Shingo's work or his greatness, and most of those presumed that the Toyota Production System (aka "lean") had no application outside of manufacturing.

Dr. Shingo, eighty-eight years old by this time and physically frail, was in a wheel chair for the conference, but rose to his feet and stood to address the large gathering. Dr. Shingo was expected to discuss the best practices he had pioneered. Before he began his formal presentation, however, Shingo called out to the moderator of the session, seated on the dais to Shingo's left.

Speaking through an interpreter, Shingo chose to take the moderator, an officer from nearby Hill Airforce Base, to task. Holding up a copy of his newly published book, *Non-stock Production*, Shingo exhorted the unwitting moderator that he ought to take Shingo's book back with him to the base and use it to eliminate waste in the military.

Shingo spoke in a strong voice as he pointed alternately to his book and then to the

commander. Although Shingo's words were translated almost as he spoke them, the echo of the English translation provided an awkward pause — a chance to reflect — to all who were listening.

Shingo was animated now and turned his attention back to the unfortunate but polite moderator who had by now come to represent wasteful government spenders. Shingo announced to the moderator through his translator: "I sent a copy of my book to Ronald Regan with a promise that if he followed my ideas, he would be able to cut the defense budget by 1/3 without any reduction in service."

Shingo turned to the audience and continued, "But obviously he didn't read my book, so your taxes will continue to go up." Shingo's speech went on after this as he covered the topics he'd been expected to cover. But the highlight was in the unexpected. No one anticipated his verbal assault on wasteful government spending.

Fast forward to the recent evening news, overcrowded with the same debate. How do we bring the national debt under control? Do we raise taxes or cut programs — or both? I think Shingo would say "Neither." He would say as he did in 1989, "Read my book, understand where to find waste and cut the budget by 1/3 without any reduction in service!"

And today there is some good news on that front. There are glimmers of hope in federal, state and local government:

1. Using Lean principles, The Jacksonville Florida Sheriff's Department has reduced its annual budget by $30 million with no reduction in services.

2. In Maine, a state-wide lean initiative [1] has broadly adapted Lean thinking to state government.

3. In a June 30, 2011 newsletter [2], the State of Washington Attorney General's Office announced a $17 million dollar reduction in costs without reduction in services.

4. The town of Durham, New Hampshire has embraced Lean as a means to continuously improve service to its "customers."

Lean government efforts are spawning today in greater numbers, and lean leaders in that arena are sharing what they have learned at the2011 Lean Systems Summit [3] on August 12 in Portland, Maine. Efforts like these are the true means to a balanced budget and a more favorable environment for private industry. I'll be there two weeks from today to participate and support these important efforts and hope to see you there as well.

OldLeanDude.org *[4] is written by Bruce Hamilton (aka The Toast Guy from the best-selling Toast Kaizen lean training DVD and president of GBMP, Inc.).*

Oldleandude.org is an on-going reflection on Lean philosophy and practices with an emphasis on keeping good jobs close to home. Read more at www.oldleandude.org *[4] and subscribe to receive new posts automatically to your inbox. We sincerely hope you'll join in on the discussion.*

GBMP helps develop a strong and vibrant regional economy through training in continuous improvement principles and is the administrator of The Shingo Prize for Operational Excellence in the Northeast. GBMP's annual conference is the lean event of the year. Contact david.mantey@advantagemedia.com *[5] for syndication.*

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