Invent your own Lean Phenomenon

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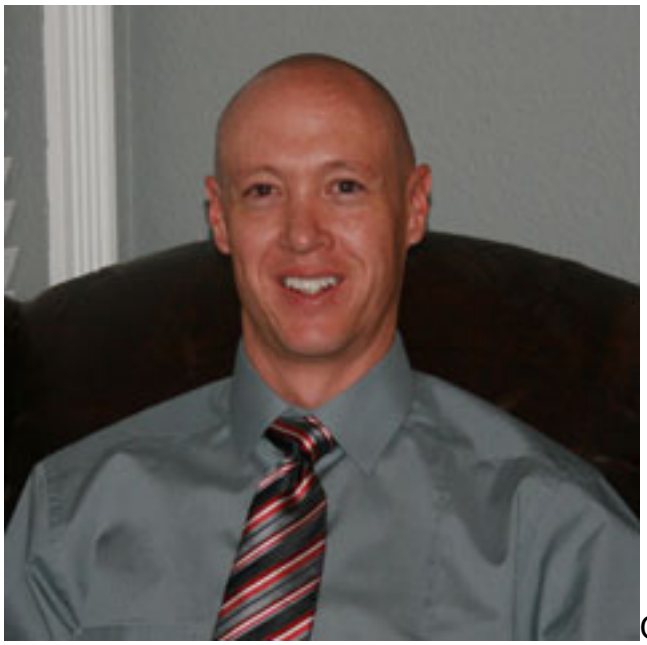

Create an environment within your own team or business in which your own methodology for business improvement can be hatched, and evolve, grow and become game changing. It’s not easy to lead such a cultural development, but the formula is fairly simple.

The Rest of the Story

Take a moment and consider something that you are very skilled at. It may be business related or it may be a hobby, such as playing piano, singing in the choir or troubleshooting your motorcycle. Chances are, whatever it is, it is something that you do every day — or nearly every day — and it’s something you are passionate about.

Your continuous business improvement program can be something that your team does better than anyone else, but it must become something that everyone in your business does passionately every day. If we examine two popular programs to see how they came about, namely Lean and Six Sigma, we can reverse engineer the formula by which they came to be so powerful.

Both Lean and Six Sigma are innovations in business and process improvement. Innovation occurs when there is sufficient incentive or pressure to innovate, and when resources are devoted to the cause. Rather than waiting for need and resources to fall in our laps, we can generate the need and enable the resources. It’s straightforward and more feasible, perhaps, than we typically imagine.

Lean was brought to the United States and the rest of the world by some very

observant fellows, who learned how Toyota accomplished exceptional operational efficiency and effectiveness, and articulated what Toyota did and taught it to the rest of us. Six Sigma was born at Motorola and likewise brought to the rest of us by some individuals who saw a way to explain and teach what Motorola was able to do differently than anyone else.

Both Toyota and Motorola created environments and cultures that not just enabled, but demanded the development of these game-changing methodologies. If we can decode the formula for such an environment, we too can turn our own teams or businesses into a birthing ground for a phenomenon.

Even if our efforts don't provide an industry-wide phenomenon, our business might very well benefit. Also, the Lean or Six Sigma methods may not be the right methods for all of us. We can invent our own methods and get the world-class improvement out of them if we can create the right environment. Then our businesses will be enviable.

Toyota's culture began decades ago when the Japanese economy was all but sunk, and the world market perception of Japanese automobile products was poor. Certainly, the pressure to do things in a new way was extreme. The focus was set on flawless, efficient production. The entire business' survival depended upon making the most of every yen and the entire staff was devoted to the battle.

Motorola was a competitor in a viciously competitive market and needed to do things very differently if it was to rise above the competition. If it failed, it would decline and disappear. Again, the incentive to innovate business was high. Motorola recognized that every business and production process affected every other, and decided to focus on understanding and controlling processes to better manage the business' dollars and how effectively they were spent.

Our own businesses may or may not be facing a crisis right now, but we can still generate a passionate need to innovate a business improvement program. We can also provide the environment for the development of methods and skills to improve the business. What's more, we don't need to be improvement experts ourselves to do it.

Here is how we can begin. Here is a simple formula for the creation of the primordial soup from which your phenomenal program can grow:

1. Declare your primary business objective.
2. Identify your enemy and declare war.
3. Ask every day, "How goes the war?"
4. Empower and expect everyone to fight the war in his/her everyday work.
5. Communicate "how goes the war" as often as possible.

Five actions are all it takes. That's not to say that it is easy to lead a big change, but the things you must lead are few and basic. It's good news.

Also, before we explain each of the five steps, we need to recognize that this can work for an entire business and it can also work for a large or small team within a business. Suppose that you are a project manager. You can use this formula to improve the way your team executes projects. Read on and you will see.

1. Declare your primary business objective.

Toyota made it clear that every business activity must be focused on getting the next product out the door, on time, without error. If what you were doing wasn't focused on that objective, it wasn't important. What is most important to your business or team? Is it finding more market? Is it inventing new technology? Is it serving customers? Articulate it clearly and make it a directive.

2. Identify your enemy and declare war.

Toyota identified waste as the enemy. Any activity that stole money or energy away from the directive of getting the next product out on time and without error was waste, and must be eliminated. The Lean methodology is built around this idea and most of the skills are centered on identifying and eliminating waste.

Motorola identified variation as the enemy. Variation drove resources to expend time and energy trying to manage all of the out-of-control elements to prevent loss, errors, or even disaster. As a result, the Six Sigma methodology is focused on tools and skills for identifying and controlling variation.

What is your enemy? Is it waste or variation? If so, don't re-invent the wheel. Implement the existing methodologies. Is it something else though? Is it communication breakdown? Is it lack of focus or safety? Identify what is fundamentally standing in the way of phenomenal success and declare war. Be sure to get to the root cause, not just a surface result of a deeper cause.

Declare war. It's the most important part. Make it clear to everyone you command that the war is not over until the enemy is entirely eliminated. Surrender is not an option. Refusing to fight is not an option.

3. Ask every day, "How goes the war?"

This is how you let everyone know you are serious and that it's not just some idea you had that you will forget in a week or a month. It also lets you gage progress and how well your team is adapting to the new directive.

If you start getting the same answer every time you ask, or if you feel like it's not being taken seriously, investigate your concerns by walking around and talking with everyone about what is happening. Ask them how they battle the enemy in their every-day work. Ask them what they think about the directive.

When you ask, be all ears, no mouth. Refrain from trying to change people's opinion on the spot or from educating. There will be plenty of opportunity for that, but if you in any way make your teammates feel foolish or punished for answering your questions, they never will again. Just collect the information and take time to determine if you need to adjust your leadership of the directive, or if your program needs something, such as skills or tools.

4. Empower and expect everyone to fight the war in his/her everyday work.

Having everyone actively fighting the war is the only real way to win. You can make gains with select, specialized resources, but eventually they will hit a wall. Your communications from step three are a great way to set the expectation that everyone has been conscripted.

Once everyone understands that refusing to fight is not an option, you must give them the authority and the tools to fight the war. Adjust whatever policies and leadership structures or habits you need to, but put the authority to make changes at the level where the process or problem exists. Enable users to change the things they use. If people need to ask for more than one level of permission to make a change, the change won't happen.

5. Communicate "how goes the war" as often as possible.

There is a strange combination of phenomena that occur when you declare war on the enemy. People become focused on your business's primary objective and begin to think differently about their roles and how they contribute. This is what you want. Unfortunately, many will also feel overwhelmed.

When you conscript everyone and make it clear that they are expected to fight the war, actively, every day, and that the war will not be over until the enemy is completely eliminated (translation: the war will never be over), people become discouraged. Why not? It's natural.

We can battle the overwhelming impression of the war by communicating the gains made on a frequent basis. You must determine what the right pace is for your own business or team, but it should be at least monthly. Your existing communication events and meetings are likely the forum.

It is important to communicate your victories and your goals. It makes the war feel like something that can be won. It also reinforces your conviction and lets everyone know you are serious.

If you can lead your business or your team through these five activities, you can create the right environment for a game-changing program of business improvement. What's best is that it will be a program focused on your business, not one that was borrowed or modified from another business. It will be right for your culture.

For example, let’s say you are a project manager in charge of a project team and you believe that your enemy is a breakdown in communication. The next time you meet with your team, declare your primary objective and declare war on the enemy.

Let everyone know that delivering a successful solution, on time is your team’s primary objective. Anything else is of secondary importance (this may include following all of the rules — though you must remain legal and ethical of course). Declare war on failed communications and give some examples of what you mean and why it’s so important. Let everyone know they are expected to fight the war.

Now, every time you have a discussion with a teammate, after the business at hand is settled, ask about the war. At the team meetings, ask about what has been done to win battles about broken communications. Give examples you observed where your team won, and lost.

Congratulations, you just created an environment in which the pressure to innovate is great, and the ability to experiment and invent solutions is not just enabled, but expected. This is how your new methodology is born. It usually doesn’t take a huge investment or re-allocation of resources.

What you will find is that your teammates will begin inventing ways to communicate better, flawlessly. They will be simple, and they will work. Make them share these tools and methods with the rest of the team. You don’t need to hire consultants or expensive training programs. Let the demand and the authority do the work for you. Your team will respond and your project will benefit.

When that project is over and you are leading your next one, chances are that many of your new project team members will have also participated on the last one. Make the same declaration and set the same expectations. Drive the same behaviors and make sure your veterans of the war are tutoring your new recruits. Before you know it you will be the most sought after project manager in the business.

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The formula above is simple and may seem obvious. It is, but very few businesses or teams have taken the steps to declare war on an enemy and conscript the entire workforce. It’s not easy to lead, but it is effective and very, very powerful. Pick a team you lead and give it a try. You will be surprised just how effective it can be.

Stay wise, friends.

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