

Lean: New flavour of the month?

What's in a name?

Recently I heard snippets of a conversation between two production directors. "I have achieved fantastic results with TPM. The improvements in the operational result that it has achieved are incredible!!". "Oh really, I have been working with Six-Sigma. Do you know it? It's brand new! And that after we had introduced a Lean project last year. These things really help us to progress. You should try it as well." This went on for a while, during which time they, in passing, also talked about BPR, TQM and Empowerment.

Both were so full of the things they were doing that they hardly listened to each other. And if they paid any attention to what the other had to say it mainly concerned the differences and not the similarities.

This comparison and promotion of the differences in improvement strategies is promoted by the suppliers of the methods. The suppliers of TPM swear by their method and so Lean or Six Sigma cannot be the right approach.... what a waste!!!

Let's go basic

Production has a long history with continually increasing insight into methods that can make it more effective and efficient. Effectiveness concerns achieving the objective. Efficiency concerns the use of resources to achieve the objective. We can therefore measure how good we are doing in various ways. This implies at the same time that there are losses, otherwise these terms would not even exist. And that is the essence of the similarities between all of these beautiful methods: **Eliminating losses**.

However, improvement is and will remain a human activity and this requires a special approach to actually eliminate the losses from the processes. In one way or another, all of our colleagues must be encouraged to improve their own actions. There are two fundamentally different manners of approaching this:

Very direct management
Commitment

Very direct management works as long as the presence of the person providing the management is felt. As soon as that ceases, the elimination of the loss ceases. Commitment on the other hand is harder to obtain, but is much less dependent on "the boss". The second similarity is therefore **Ownership**. By the way, when obtaining commitment, pleasure plays a decisive role!

If a group of employees wishes to commit themselves to dispensing with losses, some form of structure must be introduced. Although there are many possible variations on this theme, they all prove to have at their core the **Deming circle**: Plan, Do, Check and Act.

And with this we come to the fourth and last similarity, namely **Standardisation** or embedding in the system. Without standardisation, no improvement is permanent. Standardisation is once more a human activity and, you can guess it already, this also stands or falls with commitment.

The core of improvement

If you are already engaged with one of the trends or whims in Improvement Land, first check whether the basic conditions are satisfied. If yes you cannot fail, but guard against superfluosity and the following of fads. How to start:

1. Take a method that has, in any case, a good core (focused on losses, ownership, Deming, standardisation)

2. Add the core ingredients of the other methods (the core then concerns the losses that the method addresses most effectively)

3. Continue to do this until there are no methods remaining. The result is a complete tool box, that when used skilfully, is a collection of the most effective and efficient methods to improve the daily activities. Then call the resulting collection anything you want, so that has a meaning for you and your colleagues.

That's in a name!