

Lean Is For Everyone – The Lean Institute Offers Holistic Programs

Nicole Udelhofen (ACTLean) in an interview with the complexity management journal staff about new topics in Lean Management, training, learning factories, and coaching.

Mrs. Udelhofen, you are a trainer and coach at ACTLean. From your experiences where do you see the biggest challenges implementing Lean in enterprises?

The biggest challenge really is the mindset of the management staff. Many people still think nowadays that lean is only something for production people or maybe operative staff in administrative and support areas, but Lean is for everybody. There is only one King, the external customer (or the market in general). All leaders need to understand that they are part of a process that needs to be oriented towards the market and that must be improved every day. That means all management staff must become part of the change towards a more efficient and better enterprise and must change themselves. Once the leaders agree to this basic principle, it becomes much easier to provide resources for the development of improvement measures.

The second challenge is continuation. It's very easy to evaluate the efforts needed to conduct lean activities, but it is much more complicated to calculate efforts and costs of missed improvement opportunities.

As you said, lean management is not only used in production but also other areas of an enterprise. What areas are these?

Enterprises that have been dealing with lean for a longer time have recognized that the basic rules of lean are applicable everywhere. The key is to use methods and tools that have proven themselves in the production area and make them usable in other areas as well. The next logical step was to use lean in areas that directly support production, such as order processing or maintenance. Meanwhile, we have successfully implemented lean administration principles in almost all administrative areas such as sales, supply chain, purchasing, etc.

The most recent development is lean innovation. With lean innovation, lean methods and tools are further developed so they can be successfully used in R & D processes. This is a topic that has been successfully implemented in many world-renown enterprises in the mean time. With lean innovation, it is possible to close the last gap in the value creation chain starting from the customer desire where the product is only an idea, towards true customer value, where the customer can now gain value out of the implemented ideas. ACTLean thereby can help to not only optimize the production system but to develop and implement the business system as a whole using integrated and harmonized principles.

How is ACTLean implementing such business systems in an enterprise? Do you have different methodologies?

Successful implementation takes place in three phases.

First, commitment. All employees, and in particular management staff must be informed of everything that will be done and that has to be achieved. Of course they will have to assume different roles.

Second, screening and activation. Together with the entire team, the current state is documented and analyzed from a lean point of view. The employees learn to see things with different eyes and therefore can actively help with the development of concepts for improvements. This promotes identification with the new ways of working and ensures sustainability.

Third, implementation. Concepts must be integrated in daily operations, which is the most difficult phase for all employees. In the beginning there are only a few that are affected by lean and for them it is relatively difficult to survive against the old world. To support them, intensive training can be provided by ACTLean. Coaching of the management staff is also of greatest importance.

Part of our training concept for example is training in one of our learning factories. This training can be stationary or even on a mobile trailer which allows training directly at the premises of the enterprise. Participants can learn in an environment similar to their own process and learn lean methods without risk for failure, collect positive learning experiences, and thereby gain trust in the lean methods. Besides that, simulations and planning games as well as practical exercises are core elements of the training.

Despite all the training, sometimes it's just difficult to transfer the theory into practice. To facilitate that, we provide coaching by experienced trainers, matching the needs of the management staff and providing the security that is normally not available in the beginning of the process.

You talked about learning factories. Are those factories specific for a certain industry or can they be used to train employees in various industries in lean management?

Our trainers are active in almost all industries. This is the case for industries with piece oriented manufacturing where our trainers can support producers of single parts as well as manufacturers of complex equipment like control cabinets or turbines. The same is true for processing industries where we are active in life sciences as well as chemistry.

It is our goal to provide our clients with learning environments that are similar to the processes they experience in their daily life. Therefore, we are orienting our learning factories towards piece based manufacturing as well as continuous manufacturing.

That means training is one of the most important topics at ACTLean?

Yes, indeed. Our training classes are based around the requirements of the SME bronze, silver and gold certificates, focusing on point activities, process improvements, and strategic realignments.

It is safe to say our training meets international standards and the content reflects state-of-the-art methods that are insured by the adoption of the certification standard. That is of greatest importance.

However, for us it is not only learning a theory but primarily the impact that those lean experts will have in their enterprises. This is another reason why we support the SME lean certification standard as practical work is an integrated part of the certification.

Besides training, an often discussed topic is sustainability. What does that mean for lean management and how do you see the need for development from a trainer's point of view?

We are seeing two problem areas:

First, lean thinking is not fully adopted among leaders of today's enterprises. That means the ongoing lean activities are evaluated differently. As a result it is possible that even successful areas can lag behind again after a change of leadership.

Second, lean also means an improvement of processes. Most company's controlling systems however are oriented toward isolated cost centers. That means effects of lean cannot always be shown with the classic controlling systems. Quite often the results will only appear after a while when financial improvements can be seen, making it particularly difficult to implement and sustain lean in large conglomerates. Of course, we are trying to improve the situation. With our lean costing seminar we try to improve communication between controlling and lean practitioners. In the mid-range we try to improve costing and controlling systems in order to support process orientation and value creation.

[Thank You for this interesting discussion.](#)

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