

The 12 1/2 Truths of a Lean Transformation



By Charles Hagood

Many years of observing industries of all shapes and sizes as they embark upon a Lean journey, have revealed a number of “truths”. It doesn’t matter if the company is part of the healthcare industry or the manufacturing industry, common truths permeate most all Lean transformations. Some colleagues and I recently developed the following list of truths that describe the transformation that organizations experience as they move from waste ridden non-value added processes and systems to a Lean organization. These organizations relentlessly target waste for elimination and focus on improving the customers/patients value streams for better quality and lower costs. Please understand that the following list wasn’t the result of detailed scientific research but observed truths from Lean practitioners with experience in various industries.

1. Lean isn’t easy to do...if so everyone would have already done it!

If you anticipate that a Lean transformation is going to be easy, then think again. Many of the concepts are meant to be easy to grasp and most times they are, but it takes dedication, diligence, and hard work to make the transformation a reality over time. Many organizations that started out strong didn’t have the stomach to see the transformation through. Why, because it requires sustained, consistent effort!

2. Waste must be viewed as the enemy #1 if you are to be successful.

Waste...whether it be waiting, rework/defects, transporting, extra processing, overproduction, inventory, or motion, has to be viewed as the enemy. Target it for elimination! Tolerance of waste must become inexcusable in all processes in order to be successful.

3. Ownership of the process is a MUST at all levels of the organization.

A Lean transformation will fail if not embraced at all levels. Be aware that many times significant Lean ownership issues will surface even at the top levels of the organization. This can be the most dangerous given their subtleties which can undermine the efforts of those below them in the organization.

4. Ultimately there can’t be an option to not embrace the philosophy.

You should take adequate time to bring everyone along in the organization with the Lean approach to doing business. This will take time but, ultimately leadership must make it clear that eliminating waste and improving the operation is not optional.

5. Lean will succeed or fail based upon the organizations leadership.

I’ve always believed that everything rises and falls based upon leadership. Nothing has highlighted this more than observing Lean transformations.

6. Lean will highlight the strengths and weaknesses of leadership.

Do you have members of your leadership that are weak, can’t make things happen, don’t follow through in execution, don’t communicate, or can’t accept change? This will become more evident than ever during a Lean transformation. The good news is that strong leaders and managers will come to the surface more than ever before. Promote and highlight the strong!

7. Leadership’s commitment will be tested early and often.

Leadership must walk the talk. Only paying lip service to the philosophy of Lean will be discovered quickly by skeptics and waste loving curmudgeons. Leadership will be watched closely so look for opportunities to make believers out of those on the fence. This does not mean everything must be warm and fuzzy, but it does mean you have to stay true to the Lean philosophy and purpose.

8. You will make mistakes! If made trying, then just try again!

The worst mistake you can make is to not try new systems and methodologies because you fear you’ll make mistake. You have to make sure that your actions do nothing to negatively affect safety, quality of products, patient care/safety, but many times we are fearful of making mistakes that don’t pose that danger.

9. Ongoing and honest communication is both crucial and a must.

You can’t communicate enough throughout the process, especially in the early days of your transformation. Your communication must be honest, painting a vision of what you’re trying to accomplish. Once you think you’ve communicated enough, you’re probably just beginning to get the vision through to the team.

10. Lean has to become more than a program or a few events. It must become a way of life which permeates all levels.

Many organizations do a few “fly by” Kaizen, Value Stream, Rapid Improvement, or 5-S events in selected areas and consider the job done. All that will do is get the organization initially excited only to be let down from lack of sustainability. That is not Lean thinking. These are elements and tools of Lean that must be used but for the transformation to be successful an organization must make eliminating waste in all forms and sizes a part of its culture and not just part of isolated events.

11. Lean isn’t cheap or a quick fix.

Many organizations think they can shortcut the process by cutting corners. Others think Lean is a quick fix and is cheap. Both thoughts are incorrect. Lean will lower your costs and improve quality and customer service over the long haul but it will not be quick or cheap.

12. Lack of timely action or follow-through will cause the process to fail.

Nothing will kill buy-in and commitment from the front line troops faster than leadership and management not following through on its commitments to the transformation, including any “work-outs”, events, action items, etc.. It’s appropriate for management to say no to some ideas but to not follow through or stall the process, due to lack of attention and commitment, will be the death nail of your transformation and destroy critical buy-in at all levels of the organization.

12 1/2. Most Important! And No Half Truth! Lean is ongoing and never ending!

The process of improving never ends. A Lean transformation has no end date! The process is ongoing and is never a closed out action item. There is no such thing as the perfect company or process, therefore the closest to perfect you can become is to recognize that it is a continuous process of improvement.

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