Process Simulations to Improve Judgment in Lean Implementations

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Abstract

Researchers report failure rates of Lean implementations reaching 50% or higher. Although the causes of failure remain a topic of debate, most discussions center around Lean management, not the tools, techniques, or methods of Lean. Scholars highlight inadequate appropriation of resources, intolerance for failure, top-down process improvement, poor organizational culture, and/or low trust as causes of Lean failures. To enhance Lean success, I propose viewing Lean implementation as a human judgment exercise. Lean tools are structured to "make the invisible, visible." Yet, the literature documenting human judgment errors consistently points to the failure of humans to properly perceive judgment problems. We tend to be inordinately influenced by the most recent, most typical, or most emotionally charged options when making decisions. In Lean implementation, the most recent and most typical decisions are precisely those that must be changed. Further, as with any unfamiliar information, the new ideas and approaches of Lean are likely to create discomfort and resistance. In response, management may take the role of distant observer or outsource implementation to a consultant, missing the opportunity to see problems at their source (as promoted by Gemba Walks). Workers, on the other hand, may make pro forma changes and wait out what they perceive as the latest management fad. To overcome resistance and improve judgments of management, as well as workers, I propose the use of role-play simulations to teach Lean. By using role-play simulations, participants of all organizational levels can be frustrated, learn, try, fail, and try again in an environment that is fun, low risk, and related to, but not the actual, work environment. Participants gain first-hand experience that they can trust each other to recognize problems, develop solutions, and implement changes to maintain the continuous improvement mindset required by Lean.

Biography

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