

WILL LEAN KILL *creativity* IN INNOVATION?

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In order to establish an innovative work process, it is essential to blend creativity & efficiency in the right ratio. This is true individually for team members, but also for collaboration within a team. Most professionals know that Lean can help increase efficiency, but how does Lean influence creativity?

The magic word

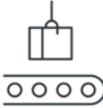
For quite a few years Lean has been the magic word in business. First by being an integrated part of Toyota's success, later by making Porsche a success company, enabling even a take-over of the much larger Volkswagen. Hundreds of companies throughout the world have had significant and measurable success by implementing Lean.

By the way, Toyota does not actually call it Lean, but Toyota Production System (TPS). The term 'Lean' was first used by an American and an Englishman, Womack and Jones, while writing their book Lean

Thinking in 1996. Ever since, Lean has been applied heavily, and some might think that Lean soon will go out of fashion. And even though the term 'Lean' might not continue to be the number one buzzword in the board rooms, the key principles still hold, and we believe they will for many, many years to come.

Manufacturing companies were the first to use Lean principles, then banks, call centres, insurance companies and other factories "producing" paper started to introduce "Lean Administration". More recently, development organisations have started applying Lean. Lean migrated

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ENVIRONMENT	FOCUS	OUTPUT
Manufacturing 	Material flow	Product
Administration 	Information flow	Document
Development 	Knowledge growth	Requirement spec's & product/solution

Over the years, Lean has migrated from operations into development environments

from operations into development environments. Starting in product development within manufacturing companies, Lean spread to knowledge-based businesses such as universities, consultancies and advertising agencies. Why did that happen?

It happened because Lean supports some fundamental truths, which all organisations and projects need in order to be successful. Really, it is common knowledge communicated in very simple terms. But as we all know, being simple and clear, is not always that simple. In our work with innovation processes we have found that a few principles can increase value of the solutions considerably.

Lean principles in knowledge-based teamwork

Making it visual, together

A visual and teambased process creates more insightful knowledge than individual work. A visual process increases energy and motivation, enabling team members

to build on each others ideas rather than shoot them down, because they come from another department. It also supports open dialogue and focus within the project. For instance when visualising the project plan on the wall, team members better understand what have to deliver to other team members and why they have to do it. This is a great way of establishing joint commitment towards the project objectives.

Strive for continuous improvement

Small and frequent improvements are better than large and infrequent improvements. Many significant business successes have been built by taking a lot of small steps in the right direction. It may sometimes seem as if a company just came up with a great concept all of a sudden. And surely writers of business books like to sell the idea that some recipe which they happen to have – will produce genius break-through products and services.

The best innovators are those companies with the fastest learning cycles. The learning cycle “idea → feedback → revise idea”, should be as fast as possible, and repeated as often as possible. An innovative executive once said “You have to fail

often to succeed sooner". The principle about continuous improvement is all about succeeding sooner, through fast learning.

Invert the pyramid

The employees closest to the 'problems' are those best suited to create the solutions. For instance, when developing a new product it is very unlikely that the R&D director will be the person who has had the most insightful experiences with the product, and the problems it is trying to solve. It is far more likely that those employees who meet a lot of customers – specifically unhappy customers – will acquire the insights needed to generate smart solutions.

Likewise, when making key decisions in a project, it is better to invite the steering committee down to the project room than to invite the project manager up to the board room. After all, the focus should be on project success, not on management team convenience.

So, will Lean kill creativity?

If you ask 10 average business people, 9 of them would probably say yes. That's the obvious answer. They would say that too much structure and follow-up will discourage creative people. Creatives would feel that they are being put into boxes, and labelled too. They would feel that they are no longer allowed to experiment, and that they have to walk the straight line towards the goal.

They would think it sounds boring. Admitted the word "Lean" is pretty boring, but that's another discussion. They might go on to say that you cannot produce great ideas on command.

Great ideas come when they come. And they might say a lot of other things too.

We believe the answer to the question is 'no'. The answer is 'no' for three very good reasons.

1. No, because, creative people are not creative all the time.

Sometimes they must deal with the organisations or teams in which they work. And if the hassle factor of that dealing is reduced, they will have more room to actually think creative thoughts when needed. Good examples of tasks which should not require creativity are: Finding out where to file information, accessing information and knowledge from colleagues, structuring a document so that other team members understand it. The key idea being, that if the trivial work, which has to be done, is completed faster, there will be more time to add value with insightful thinking.

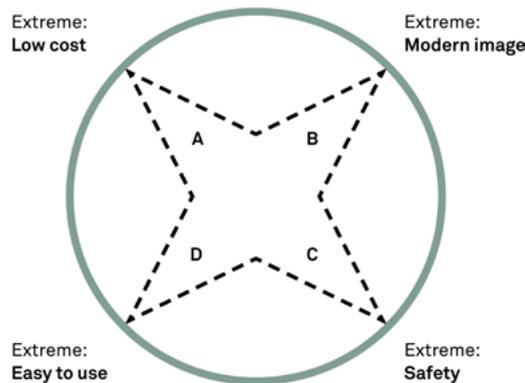
2. No, because, for a lot of people, creativity does not come naturally.

It can indeed be a difficult task to sit in front of a blank piece of paper waiting for the good idea to appear. Many of us will be more creative if the challenge is defined by clear boundaries and limits. Brainstorming is a good example of this.

Brainstorming successfully requires the whole team to first generate ideas, and then evaluate them. If evaluation is mixed with idea generation, only very few ideas will appear. Innovative teams also use a method called 'Design for extreme' for systematic exploration of the solution space. This method helps teams study 3-4 extreme solutions in parallel, and thus generate valuable knowledge that would otherwise not have been found.

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The method: Design for extreme



3. No, because, being “forced” to work together increases creativity.

Visible team processes and integrated teams support creativity. The great innovation company Ideo puts it this way: “Enlightened trial and error succeeds over the lone genius”. It is a myth that one very creative individual alone can create an innovative business success.

Many products and services are so complex that they demand creative sub solutions in many different technical areas. Designers which do not communicate well with CAD experts and manufacturing specialists are a common thing, almost as accepted as gravity or the changing seasons.

But why should it be that way? When we know that team thinking creates more value, this lack of understanding makes little sense.

Lean provides basic rules for how we work together in a respectful way. When respecting and appreciating each other, more good things will happen. That is a proven fact.

How to get the most out of Lean

Lean cannot kill creativity. Only people can kill creativity. People can kill creativity if they do not share

the same vision, if they do not trust each other and if they do not have the competences which the task requires. On the contrary, Lean can help both creative and less creative people spend more time being creative together. The success of a Lean journey obviously requires much more than the ability to use some Lean tools. It requires a different way of managing people and collaborating with others. Lean tools however, are designed to help managers get better at doing what really matters.

What matters is trusting employees and colleagues by giving them room to grow in order to generate outstanding solutions for your company and your customers. What else could it be? So, if your company is not yet the world’s best innovator, you have to continue trying new Lean tools. You have to continuously improve your ability to improve.

Lean is an endless – and luckily fun – journey.

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FAST FACTS ABOUT IMPLEMENT

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