

The Problem Solving Kata as a Tool for Culture Change: Building True Lean Organizations

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Published by personal-lean.org, 2022.

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Dedication

I created this book with the help of more than fifteen different business resources. These academic articles and books are all cited at the end of this book. A number of people have influenced my learning journey and my entire career. I would like to acknowledge them here.

Esraa Soliman: My lovely wife and partner. She encouraged me to write and publish this work. In fact, she always encourages me to do creative work.

Jeffrey Liker: Professor at the University of Michigan and author of *The Toyota Way* and the amazing Toyota series of books. His impressive work on Toyota inspired and influenced my learning about the Toyota Production System. I would really like to thank him for his indirect involvement in this work. Many examples included in this book were originally from his books. Although I have never met Jeff face to face, we have had great communications over social media platforms.

Chris Duklet: A lean manufacturing leader from the United States who works in the field of health care. He has contributed to this work by reviewing the book prior to publication and giving me useful recommendations and advice.

Attia Gomaa: Professor at the American University in Cairo who influenced my teaching career at the university and taught me how to become a good trainer.

Steven Borris: A business consultant, author, and friend from England who influenced my writing career. He encouraged me to write and publish. Steven was my mentor on lean manufacturing, helping me first to understand the basics, after which I developed my understanding through deep practice and self-directed learning.

Eslam Soliman: My friend and a professor at the Assiut University. His PhD is from the University of New Mexico. He has influenced my entire writing career by giving me recommendations and advice on how to write and publish. He revised my published works many times and kept inspiring me after every piece I wrote and published.

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CULTURE CHANGE THROUGH PROBLEM SOLVING
KATA: BUILDING TRUE LEAN ORGANIZATIONS

First edition. November, 2022.

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Introduction

Some businesses have reduced staff and made resource cuts to survive the global economic downturn, while others have improved business practices and culture. Unfortunately, there is still a difference between successful and less successful businesses in terms of culture adaptability, people management, and process management. In organizations like Toyota, which, in contrast to its rivals, has a mindset of process improvement, culture drives competitive advantage. Other businesses might benefit from Toyota's teachings by changing their routines for behaving and thinking in order to increase staff performance.

In his book *Toyota Kata*, Mike Rother wrote that none outside of the Toyota group of companies has successfully brought systematic continuous improvement into all processes every day and across the organization. Even Toyota's efforts to spread its approach of continuous improvement to outside suppliers have not met expectations.

Truly, most organizations remain far away from establishing a solid continuous improvement system, and current management behavior rarely leads corporations to do what they should do in terms of both process and people management. Bad habits, behaviors done with little or no conscious thought, continue to affect culture and hold companies back from success.

Recruiting the Right Habits

One of the initial steps for business success is getting the right people on the board with the appropriate skills and attitudes. How companies choose and hire their people reflect their organizational culture. These hires are going to develop new methods of working, invent new products, lead the transformation and build a successful business. They are the company's future leaders.

But do companies really get what they expect from their hiring candidates?

Traditionally, companies demand degrees and certifications to demonstrate expertise, while others prefer to hire based on experience, history and skills. Neither way will work if the organization in question refuses to develop a culture of improvement. Managers hire MBAs and Six Sigma black belts with the mistaken notion that they will transform the business without a transformation of management.

Yet what can a certificate holder do in a system that doesn't engage employees in the continuous improvement cycle, value their ideas and develop them continuously? A closer look at these companies reveals that they don't have a real system capable of utilizing and aligning employee skills and efforts to solve problems and achieve business goals. Your entire professional force can get certified, but if the company culture doesn't allow it, they won't get the chance to practice what they have learned.

And while certificates can prove ability, actual improvement will not occur without a high commitment to self-education and self-development to keep the certificate holder's knowledge up to date, allowing the person to develop better ways of working and practicing. Certificates don't drive performance competency in the practical world.

Josh Kaufman, author of international best-seller *Personal MBA*, wrote that a large body of evidence suggests that what some business schools teach has no connection to what is required for business success.

Unfortunately, according to Kaufman, many business programs have de-emphasized value creation and operations in favor of finance and quantitative analysis.

This extreme focus on financial analysis produces executives who are not capable of improving business performance, driving success and creating value for customers. It doesn't build distinguished leadership.

Reinforced by their MBA education, many executives and managers seek solid financial outcomes, although in many instances they have lost connection with the reality that exists on their organization's front lines. Decision-makers are poorly informed about the actual situation, and decision-making is based on incorrect assumptions and inappropriate targets. They have learned to manage the process via distance using some reported metrics. They have not been taught the culture of improvement.

For example, if managers remain behind the scenes and avoid actual place where the work is done (the *gemba*), they will not realize what small issues pop up as obstacles to success. They will make poor decisions. Then, when their business processes fail, the human resources department asks what went wrong. After all, they have hired professional qualified persons.

But hiring professionals won't, by itself, turn around an organization. However, having a real continuous improvement system and an embedded culture of improvement will. A system that empowers employees to make changes, motivates them in the right way, aligns goals and efforts with organizational strategies and vision, develops leaders continuously, bases management decisions on real situations, and makes improvement a part of everyone's daily routine is a system with a high chance of success.

Better questions, better results

When organizations base their hiring processes on certifications and classic interviews, what do the companies really know about these individuals, their behaviors and their openness to change? Do companies really get the results they need?

The hiring process can be improved to select better candidates if the human resources department, instead of asking for certifications, tests individuals properly and assesses their skills.

Toyota thinks approaches the hiring process differently. The powerhouse Japanese automaker wants to hire people who are motivated and highly committed to self-development and self-education. For Toyota to exceed customer expectations, its employees must do the same. Toyota tends to assess what its candidates know and how they are going to use that knowledge.

Jeffrey K. Liker's *The Toyota Way to Lean Leadership* originally reported that when Toyota started to hire leaders for the New United Motor Manufacturing Inc. (NUMMI) plant, the first joint venture plant between Toyota and General Motors, the focus was on hiring candidates who had demonstrated an inherent capacity for self-development and learning. Toyota wanted people who had an openness and excitement to learning new things.

Toyota also uses a system to test individuals for their abilities to work in a team. A group of candidates is placed in a meeting room and assigned a problem to solve. Toyota likes to hire the candidates who demonstrate the ability to function well in a team and devise a solution by working with others.

Organizations should use behavior-based tests and real assessments as part of any recruitment strategy. And this is where the application of industrial and organization psychology comes in.

In the book *Social Psychology and Human Nature*, authors Roy F. Baumeister and Brad J. Bushman reported that most companies use informal and unstructured behavioral interview questions like the following:

- What are your weaknesses?
- Why should we hire you?
- Why do you want to work here?
- What are your goals?

- Why are you leaving your job?
- When were you most satisfied in your job?
- What can you do for us that other candidate can't?
- What are three positive things your last boss can say about you?
- What salary are you seeking?

According to many psychologists and researchers, such traditional questions don't serve a company's real needs. Improving the hiring process to help generate a culture of change would involve using relative, reasonable and structured behavior questions such as these:

- Tell me in specific detail about a time when you had to deal with a difficult customer.
- Give me an example of a time when you had to make a decision without a supervisor present.
- Give me a specific example when you demonstrated an initiative in an employment setting.
- Give me an example of a time when you had to work in a team.
- Describe a time when you had to be creative at solving a problem.

Such questions tend to assess leadership and problem-solving skills, which is what most companies really need anyway.