

What is Lean?

There are many books on “lean”. This Factsheet aims to give readers a grounding in the key principles behind the lean philosophy, as a base for further study.

First, it is useful to start with a definition of lean, and this one from Taiichi Ohno, one of the founders of the Toyota Production System (the forerunner of lean) is a good one:

“All we are doing is looking at the time line, from the moment the customer gives us an order to the point when we collect the cash. And we are reducing the time line by reducing the non-value adding wastes.”

Thus “lean” is about improving business processes so that they deliver what the customer requires more quickly by eliminating steps that do not benefit the customer. These “non-value-adding” steps are called waste. In service process they include things such as hand-offs between systems or departments, waiting for authorisations, batching work requests, and so on.

Building on this definition, the lean philosophy focuses on three key elements:

1. Delivering what the customer actually wants and values from a process – at the right time and at the right price;
2. Streamlining and smoothing the process to consistently deliver that customer value with as few “non-value-adding” steps as possible;
3. Empowering the team to continuously improve the process.

Lean is not about making people work harder or faster, it is about identifying and removing inefficiencies from the process – unnecessary steps; over-complicated elements; excessive levels of authorisation, time delays; and so on – in order to create the capacity to do more “value-adding” work in the time available. Process improvement requires senior management support, openness, and the active involvement of people.

Company Profile

We are process improvement specialists with over 20 year’s experience, providing training and consultancy in lean service, process analysis and improvement, and lean finance.

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These things mean that lean is a people system, rather than a set of tools; and the key to success in lean is developing managers and employees to truly understand lean; be able to use lean tools; and to work together to improve processes.

Lean Management seeks to restructure the organisation into process “Value Streams”, with the aim of streamlining organisational processes and removing non-value-adding waste to improve client service; whilst also improving efficiency and value.

At the same time, lean transformation is a very empowering and energising route to take. Involve everyone and be open, and you will realise benefits. Lean is about changing the behaviour of leaders from command and control to teamworking; from firefighting to committing quality time to regular improvement activities; from management by memo and e-mail to working with the team every day; from spreadsheets and finance reports to gathering real data in real time in the work area.

There are many lean resources on the internet, and many books available. We also offer lean awareness courses to organisations.

Ideas into Action

Understanding, Involving, Improving