

UNIVERSITY OF KENTUCKY LEAN SYSTEMS PROGRAM

ADOPTING THE LEAN APPROACH



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More companies than ever before are taking part in The University of Kentucky's Lean Systems Program. Program Director Glenn Uminger discusses just what it is that makes the lean approach so attractive

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wouldn't say I have seen a change in the market in recent years, so much as that I have witnessed an increase in realisation from companies and businesses that in order to implement lean correctly it requires the understanding of management, strong leadership and a complete culture change," explains Lean Program Director, Glenn Uminger. "So many organisations have tried in the past to implement lean and have come up short in their goal. It is only when they understand that culture change and leadership have to be foundations on which to build that they start to see the benefits take hold."

The lean approach to manufacturing was first developed by Toyota's Taiichi Ohno in the aftermath of the Second World War. In the decades since, the lean approach has spread across the globe, delivering vast improvements to the manufacturing sector in the process. It was during the 1990s that Toyota began working with the University of Kentucky's (UKy) College of Engineering to develop the Lean Systems Program (LSP) to help impart the true philosophy to non-Toyota companies in the US.

In more recent times the approach has also spread into all areas of business and industry, from health care and retail, through to financial services and government. "When it comes to organisations and businesses using lean," Uminger continues, "there has certainly been much more movement beyond just production and manufacturing, with all manner of industries realising that this approach applies everywhere, in all



Students performing standardized work on a moving assembly line

types of businesses and in all parts of the organisation itself.”

In Uminger’s opinion, this desire and drive to adopt a lean approach to business is a direct result of increased competition and a continuous need for self-improvement. “The first thing we do,” he says, “is give companies a total perspective of what lean is, which includes the concepts of clear vision, leadership, culture change, having the right people in the right places and systematic problem solving methods.”

What people behind the LSP find is that companies that approach them get most excited about the idea of improving their problem solving capabilities, often because they see it as a quick way of getting results by taking something that they do and making it better.

“What we find we have to do in this situation,” Uminger highlights, “is rein them back in somewhat and explain that problem solving is in fact the end game. Having a problem solving culture throughout your organisation is what you want to end up with, but to get there you have to ensure that all the pieces of the puzzle are in place to support such a culture. This includes creating an environment where people feel free and encouraged to raise concerns



Students engage in problem solving and learn to apply lean principles to standardize and improve processes

and problems in the first place, and having management that shows its appreciation to those who do so.”

This September will play host to the third annual Lean Users Conference and Uminger hopes that it will follow in the footsteps

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of the two that have come before it. “The 2012 Lean Users Conference,” he enthuses, “was very successful and provided a forum for a wonderful exchange of ideas between our associated companies, each of which brought with them a very clear presentation of improvements that they had made through their use of the lean approach.”

One such presentation came from a hospital, which highlighted the changing performance of a particular state clinic. Previously, said clinic suffered from having a 40-day waiting period for those wishing to receive care, the consequences

of which included falling patient numbers and revenue.

“What the hospital did,” Uminger says, “was rebuild the clinic from the ground up using all of the lean principles. The result of this was a reduction of the waiting time to two weeks, which remains a leading figure amongst the clinics’ competitors. This has in turn brought patient levels back up, brought in increased revenue, but most importantly the use of lean principles has led to an improvement in patient care levels.”

Part of the focus of the LSP over the last year or so has been to become

much more actively involved with those companies looking to implement the lean process throughout their operations. This has meant a more active approach to coaching, physically going to the company's premises and from there developing a clear picture of what a true lean organisation should look like.

"What this approach has done," Uminger says, "is move us into a real world scenario where we are applying and implementing what we teach. Again, this is a process that takes time, but it is one that has already begun reaping rewards. It also enables us to coach companies on a deeper level, allowing us to apply to the teaching what we ourselves have experience with clients in the field."

The vast majority of those that use the lean approach would agree that the key to achieving the ultimate goal of being a lean business is having fundamentally good management and strong leadership in place throughout an organisation.

"Leadership is the starting and ending point of it all because it is the leaders who help create the culture that everybody then follows," Uminger concludes. "I am a firm believer in that principle. It is the essence of what lean is all about and personally I have yet to come across any organisation for which the true lean approach does not work." **BE**

For more information about University of Kentucky - Lean Systems Program visit: www.lean.uky.edu

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