

/// Management's "Magic Bullet"

J. R.

How does one effect change when your leadership believes in and supports *LEAN* Six Sigma but fails to understand how it works? The directives of the leadership fly directly in the face of even the most fundamental of tools. For example, as I begin to funnel out the X's and attempt to scope my projects, my leadership throws in more as emergent issues occur, all the while confident that we will solve the world's problems – not one at a time but with a single slash of the *LEAN* sword. The more I try to get away from firefighting, the more fires they ignite. If *LEAN* were a sword, my team would be holding it by the blade and hacking away, willy-nilly – all the while cutting their own hands. The non-believers are pointing out that it doesn't work, while the believer's dash madly about, attempting to create opportunities, meanwhile ignoring the tools. *LEAN* is something that must be believed in, but unlike religion, requires little faith. Data-driven solutions are the miracle that *LEAN* practitioners can – and do – explain in glorious detail to our bosses, who while in general agreement, fail to change their counterproductive behavior.

William B.

William,

You pose an excellent question that is affecting a great many practitioners in today's workplace. Well meaning, but ill-prepared managers and business leaders are, for the most part, doing what they think is best at the moment and responding in ways they have been taught (or learned by trial and error) through often bitter experience. The discipline to take time to think through the issue, analyze the data, develop an approach, and execute to plan is a skill set not many people have in the business world. This takes not just discipline, but personal courage to "slow down--to go fast". I say that because the natural response to a crisis is to DO SOMETHING! Often when we respond in this fashion it only makes matters worse; but at least we can point to frantic activity to show our upper management and shareholders "we are doing something! The courage comes into play when someone with training and experience in true problem solving stands up and says "stop!" This is most often the correct reaction but it is the one thing people in a crisis do not want to do, especially those above you in the food chain - so approach with appropriate caution. It's often said that a mark of great leadership is the ability to keep your head when everyone around you is losing theirs. You are in the middle of a situation tailor-made to test your ability in this regard.

Your first challenge is leadership's misperception and misuse of the *LEAN* Six Sigma methodology and its capabilities. Most leaders and managers "passed" on the opportunity to go to a White or Yellow Belt course or a simple overview training session and they formed their opinions and perceptions based on hearsay or a very superficial understanding of what it is and how it works. The only way to overcome this is to develop a way to educate them to a level where they know precisely what you and your team can and cannot do with this methodology. You may be handicapped in this area because most of them believe they already know everything they need to know. Just because you are starting out from a deficit does not mean the battle is lost. Like any other area of management, we need to develop an appropriate strategy and build a strong business case for why they need to invest their time and energy participating. Your business case should be focused on showing them what they don't know. Explain why this is a problem and the ramifications of continuing on this path. Provide data that shows the true cost of your current ineffective actions, the reduced cost of approaching this correctly, and the savings potential of the correct implementation to solve the problem long-term. Your Finance professionals should be able to help you develop these numbers.

Second, let's take a look at management's tendency to see a problem and throw something (or someone) at it. One of the hardest lessons I had to learn as a young middle manager was to say "Yes, Sir...I will be glad to take that on...What would you like for me to give up?" If you are doing everything you can do and are on the verge of being out of control, you are doing yourself and the company no favors by taking on something else that is

going to ensure that you do a bad job at everything because you are stretched too thin. Often times, bosses like to see just how much you will take on and how you handle the stress involved in determining your level of maturity and capabilities. Yes, we are cruel like that on occasion. Sometimes they do not know what your workload is at the moment and if you say nothing you are confirming to them that “you’ve got this” with no problems. Develop your own limits--then stretch yourself. You can do more than you think, but when you reach your limit, speak up! Good leaders like to see people who know their limits and act accordingly.

This situation can be extremely difficult but can also grow you in many ways. Not the least of which is to train you how NOT to respond when the responsibility is yours in the future!

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