



The Tragedy of Lean Theater

By Damon Baker

During my 20+ years of experience adding value to organizations by helping them implement lean practices that drive continuous improvement, I have seen most organizations undergo long-lasting change for the better. These companies have invested genuine effort to improve their business processes and have reaped positive results. Their discipline, openness to needed change, and hard work have paid off – and they *continue* to keep their profitability trending upward during their lean journey.

Ultimately, they understand that the lean transformation is a journey without end.

On the other hand, I have worked with all too many organizations dedicated to a completely lax, or unauthentic, version of the lean journey. Sadly, such companies busy themselves producing a tragic play – one which I call “Lean Theater”.

Theater can trace its earliest roots to the Greeks, who put on elaborate open-air performances using only two masks for their plays – representing the dual faces of the god, Janus. Symbolizing

tragedy and comedy -- joy and sorrow -- these masks have been handed down through the ages and still serve as the primal driving force of today's theater.

Janus was a god of "beginnings, doorways, gates, and passages" (Varnekar, 2018). The first classical actors required masks to project their dramatic performances to the audience. The key aspect of such projection was the exaggeration of the acting. (Remember there was no sound system in Ancient Greece!)

Nowadays, many companies that rely on the theatrics of tragedy and comedy merely go through the motions of *appearing* dedicated to the never-ending rigors of the lean journey. Instead, they are mired in a bad play.

Instead of being real people, they are cardboard characters in a poorly-produced off-off Broadway one-act play. Not to slight actors, but the actors in Lean Theater are simply applying their talents in the wrong place.

Such companies go into a frenzied overdrive and their toolbox is overloaded with lean jargon and other such superficiality. In other words, they do not do the necessary WORK such as going to the gemba, eliminating waste, designing countermeasures, and establishing a foundation of stable flow (Wilson 2013) – to name only a few nuts and bolts of a true lean transformation.

For instance, such companies may implement theatrical "props" such as Daily Management boards, tape on floors, and signage around the factory...genuine tools designed to streamline systems vital to organizational success. However, in the hands of noncommittal management, these tools serve as ennobling indicators of their newfound dedication to "lean".

Indeed, all of the right props are there for a lean transformation, but sincerity, clarity and consistency are missing. Moreover, the necessary footwork and deeper understanding of the principles is missing.

All the "right" buzzwords can be found in an organization's newly-found zeal for lean. However, their management teams may talk the talk but they do not walk the long walk of the lean journey. All the usual actors in companies "going lean" are present but the disastrous performances they *act out* undercut any legitimate efforts to add lasting value to the organization.

Instead, Lean Theater prevails. Sometimes, the company production is almost worthy of a Tony Award. However, an organization "dedicated" to a *faux* lean transformation is easily recognizable. Some less than stellar performances I have encountered include...

A Fortune 500 company that dispatched several hundred auditors who would fly around the globe, often in business class, visiting their operating companies on a 2-year cycle to "assess" the "leanness" of the organization, with the end outcome of giving a score on an assessment. The companies being assessed would prepare for months in advance of the audit and they focused on building a narrative that helped them persuade the auditors that what they were seeing was great evidence of a true lean transformation. Once the audit was completed, it was back to business as usual. Did I mention that this company trailed its peers in terms of total shareholder returns?

The President who would demand that his team submit and complete a minimum of 2 kaizens per month, because he believed that the quantity of kaizen events completed was somehow an indicator of his commitment to lean as a leader. As you can imagine, his people submitted all sorts of superficial ideas and this company ultimately wasted valuable resources fixing the wrong problems. People ran the other direction at the first mention of the words “kaizen event”. He never participated on any of them by the way.

Let’s not forget the countless company-wide 5S initiatives that have been launched, much to the dismay of the unfortunate associates that had to put up with an autocratic, non-sensical interpretation of the concept put poorly into practice. Placing tape around monitors, labeling the phones, limiting the number of pens, pencils, and personal effects that people can have on their desk. It’s no wonder people cringe when they hear the word “lean”. It conjures up some sordid experience that left a really bad taste in their mouths.

It is important to note that books about organizational lean practices are great but reading a book (or investing in many books) is not enough to get all stakeholders on-board, implementing an organization’s lean initiatives and staying the right course. Perusing a few books typically leads to academic laziness, sententiousness or may aggravate organizational hiccups and more serious process and systemic faults.

In theory, lean principles are easy to understand. In any endeavor, experience is the best teacher. During their chaotic conversion to becoming “lean”, many organizations may misinterpret certain fundamentals from the get-go. For instance, failure to apply the Pareto Principle (the 80/20 Rule) tasks a company’s limited resources to plugging up every single leak along the value chain – a waste of time and money. Lean’s first principle? That’s right...eliminate all waste! But which waste is most relevant to delivering business results?

Despite its' prevalence, avoiding the pitfalls of Lean Theater is not as difficult as it may sound. However, a genuine culture transformation is a prelude to success along the continuous improvement journey. Like any good spectator, outside observers (the right ones), can provide a rigorous, logical assessment and road map towards the ultimate goals of “lean” initiatives – long-term growth and increased profitability. With some guidance, finally, companies can prevent a lean transformation from becoming the Tragedy of Lean Theater.

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BACKGROUND

Damon is the President & CEO of Lean Focus. For over 20 years, he has been implementing lean in consulting, operations, continuous improvement, and GM & VP-level leadership roles for such companies as Danaher, HNI, Eaton, Argo Consulting, Experian, and Winegard.

Trained by disciples of the Toyota Production System, he worked in a Shingo Prize winning facility and is a Shingo Prize Examiner. Over his career he has demonstrated hands-on leadership and facilitation of 500+ kaizen events for 42 major corporations in 16 different countries. Damon led the North American Danaher Business System Office. While at Danaher, one of his mentored operating companies was nominated Most Improved Plant, and one of his factories won Best Plant Worldwide 2 years in a row. Damon holds an MBA from St. Ambrose University and a Bachelors of Arts in Management and Marketing from Iowa Wesleyan University.

INDUSTRY EXPERIENCE

Aerospace and Defense, Automotive, Electronics, Capital Equipment, Chemicals, Protective Packaging, Residential Construction Materials, Water Quality, Dental, Test & Measurement, Sheet Metal Fabrication, Life Sciences, Medical Devices, Discrete Assembly, Oil and Gas.

LEAN EXPERIENCE

Building/Installing Problem Solving & Kaizen Cultures, Operational Due Diligence, Acquisition Integration, Strategic Planning & Policy Deployment, Sales Force Efficiency & Effectiveness Tools, Pricing Margin Analysis, Transactional Kaizen, EBITDA focused operational improvements, Cellular Manufacturing, 6S & Visual Management, Standardized Work, Mistake Proofing (Poka Yoke), Visual Controls, Setup Reduction (SMED), Total Productive Maintenance (TPM), Daily Management Processes, Leader Standard Work, Working Capital reduction via Kanban & Pull Based Inventory tools, DSO Reduction, and Accounts Payable processes, Value Analysis & Engineering, 3P, Accelerated Product Development Tools.

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