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How Lean Leaders Lead

Organizations and leaders aiming to create a culture of continuous improvement, where lean thinking and practice thrive, take note: how management communicates with employees plays a critical role — and it's often the missing element in many failed attempts at lean transformation. The insights in this Lean Post compilation will help make sure you get it right.

Leaders' Actions Speak but Their Talk Matters Too

The following collection of Lean Post articles from Lean Coach David Verble examines how the way managers and leaders talk to employees (and to each other) can contribute, or be a barrier to, creating and sustaining a culture of engagement and continuous improvement.

Many organizations are investing in lean continuous improvement programs, systems and staff. The aim for most is to transform to a culture where employees are engaged in problem-solving at the workflow level. Frequently there are critical pieces missing in these initiatives, however. One key piece is defining a new role for the managers who are asked to lead in a continuous improvement culture. Another is helping managers develop the skills and habits needed to be effective leaders in the new environment.

The traditional ideas about the role of managers are based on assumptions about their position, function and experience. The traditional manager is expected to have more key business information and insight into the workings of the organization and operations than her or his employees. That leads to the related expectation that the manager is in the best position to solve problems, decide improvements and drive results. It is also the basis for the assumption that managers should tell employees what to think, direct their activities and coach by feedback and correction.

Such assumptions and behaviors were more effective when operations were simpler, change was less frequent and there was less information to be processed and managed. They do not work as well when the aim is to engage employees in sharing what they know about problems and using what they know to think of and execute solutions and improvements.

In a lean organization, employees have to believe they are safe in pointing out problems, allowed to offer their ideas for solutions and improvements, and respected as capable of the thinking required for problem solving responsibility. The dilemma is that the behaviors of traditional managers do not communicate any of these beliefs or help create the kind of environment that invites or supports employee responsibility or initiative.

> "Many of the underlying assumptions about management in the traditional model lead to leader attitudes and behaviors that are barriers to engaging employees."

Most lean/CI programs do not offer managers and leaders help in recognizing that the ways they have always been rewarded for thinking and acting do not serve the new business priority of employee engagement in problem solving responsibility. And managers are seldom supported in changing to more supportive and effective behaviors. For example, manager standard work programs often focus on getting leaders to go to the worksite but don't describe how they should act and talk when they get there.

Many of the underlying assumptions about management in the traditional model lead to leader attitudes and behaviors that are barriers to engaging employees. The challenges managers face in making the transition from traditional managers to continuous improvement leaders are many and huge. It is essential to bring those challenges into the open and lead our organizations in finding ways to address them if we are to achieve the lean/continuous improvement culture we aspire to.

It is not just a matter of telling managers that many of our current ways of talking to employees are having an unintended impact on the aim of *engaging employees*. Our habits as knowers and fixers are deeply ingrained in us and in our culture as a whole. But there are small but effective changes managers and leaders can make in the way they relate to employees when taking about problems that will make a big difference. As a starting point, I believe if leaders experiment with these five new behaviors the impact on engagement will be remarkable:

1. **Asking questions they don't think they already know the answer to**
2. **Listening to the person, not just the problem**
3. **Acknowledging they heard and what they heard (nothing does more to show respect)**
4. **Asking questions focused on things they wonder about, not about what they are thinking**
5. **Ask what help is needed or wanted**

Hopefully when line managers and senior leaders see a difference in employee openness and energy, they will be "pulled" to work on developing these behaviors into habits that become automatic when talking to teams about issues in the work. Any or all of the behaviors can contribute to creating a management environment in which employees feel safe and confident in sharing what they know and stepping up as self-initiating problem solvers. Ask your leaders to experiment with the new behaviors along with you. ■

Manager-Employee Communication: What Neuroscience Tells Us

Delving deeper into how humans' innate social need to be connected and accepted explains why and how a leader or managers' interactions with employees can make or break a culture of continuous improvement.

We have a strong, innate social need to be connected to and accepted by others. It is as strong as our instinct for physical survival and is in fact part of our drive to survive through cooperating with others. We experience the pain of social loss (rejection, exclusion, humiliation, bullying, disrespect) in the same ways and in the same places in our brain as we do physical pain. The same chemicals are released into our brains in both cases but we are able to forget the feelings associated with physical injury more quickly than loss of relationship or group connection. This suggests how critical the social side of our lives was and still is to our survival.

Researchers suggest the way we describe social loss ("She broke my heart," "I was crushed," "It was like a kick in the head," "It was a blow to my pride," "He cut me deeply.") is an indication of overlap between how our brains experience the emotional aspects of physical and social injury. Functional MRI images show two regions of our brains are activated when we are physically hurt, one for the bodily sensations and the other for the feelings that accompany the injury. Images of people experiencing simulated rejection or memories of close personal loss show that same feeling region is activated by social pain also.

Our response to social threats (including loss of status or acceptance) is the primitive option of "fight or flight." Since we can't do either at work without losing our jobs the typical third option is to freeze, followed by actions ranging from withdrawal to trying to undermine the source of the pain covertly. At work the threats to our social wellbeing usually come in the form of what is said, how it is said and how it affects our standing in the group.

> "There is risk for leaders who do not focus the social side of their roles in the same way they do the results oriented side."

Using functional MRIs researchers have identified several social situations in which our neural network that responds to threats is activated. They include conditions and actions by others that lessen our status or appearance of competence, make us uncertain because we lack information or clarity as to what is expected of us, seem to us unfair or make us feel we are not accepted by groups that are important to us or that we are losing key relationships. We react defensively to threats or "injuries" in these areas in both our personal lives and in the social systems where we work with equal emotion.

At the most basic level the forms of expressions a manager or leader uses in talking to a employee have profound social implication for the employee's relationship with the manager, the work group and the employee's work. Here are three common examples. First, commands, demands, public feedback or rebukes all provoke a threat response in our brains even if we are not able to push back outwardly. There is evidence that indicates that commands or demands have the effect of lessening our sense of responsibility for what we do have to do in response.

A closed or leading question frequently feels much the same as a command. Coming from a manager or leader it essentially communicates, "This is something I want you to agree to or accept." It is experienced as being talked down to, which puts the receiver in a lesser position and lessen his or her ownership of the action or ideas he/she has to accept. Both direct commands or feedback and questions used as implied commands are threatening to our social standing and competence and produce pain and withdrawal to some degree.

The experience of being asked an open-ended question is, however, very different after we get over the initial shock. The shock is because the experience is both novel —it doesn't happen very often—and challenging, because it means we have to think. The social implications are generally positive if a bit stressful especially after we learn we are actually going to be listened to. The implications are that we are seen as capable of thinking and having valuable information and ideas (status) and we are on a par with the questioner (acceptance). There is indication that open questions or challenges in fact activate the reward system in our brain. These positive effects are, however, negated if the leader's response implies there is a "right" answer we are expected to have.

> "A closed or leading question frequently feels much the same as a command."

There is another side to our social lives at work and away from it. Experiences in the same areas where we can be threatened (status, competence, predictability, belonging and being treated fairly) can also bring us pleasure. The neural reward network in our brains releases hormones that make us feel good when we are asked to join a group or collaborate with others, given meaningful responsibilities and clear expectations, recognized for our competence or contribution, accepted or shown approval and treated equally and fairly. These feelings reinforce our drive for positive social relationships and increase our sense of connection to and responsibility for others and the groups in our personal lives. They also increase our commitment to shared goals and our engagement in efforts for the common good at work.

What is important about this research for managers and leaders? It would seem to indicate that there is risk for leaders who do not focus the social side of their roles (how they talk to, treat and relate to employees) in the same way they do the results-oriented side.

Here is a summary of research that asked 60,000 employees to identify the characteristics of a "great leader," which reinforces that possibility:

- 14% identified "being strong on results-focus"

- 12% chose "having social skills"
- 72% specified both "being strong on results-focus" and "having social skills"

Sadly, but maybe not surprising, less than 1% rated their leaders as having both of those characteristics. ■

Want to Be a Better Leader and Coach? Listen to Yourself

Conduct this simple two-step analysis to learn whether you're practicing the communication behavior that encourages a culture of engagement and continuous improvement.

What do others hear when you talk to them about problems? You are trying to create an environment in which staff, peers and coachees are engaged in thinking with you about problems. But what do they *hear* when you speak? Does what you say invite others to think with you or does it mostly tell them what you think – and by implication what they should think? If this makes you curious about your own impact as a leader or coach how do you find out? Here is a self-check you can try:

The next time you are at a tier meeting or project review as a leader or the facilitator in a huddle or problem-solving team meeting, audiotape yourself (you don't need video, just audio.) And you don't need special equipment. You can get an audio recording app on your phone. Most recent edition phones come with one installed. All you need to do is tell those in the session that you are going to be recording yourself as a self-check, open the app, hit the start button and set your phone on the table near you or put it in your shirt pocket (you only need to record yourself) and forget about it until the session is done.

Or, if someone comes to you to talk about a problem or you are coaching an employee or peer, ask if it's okay to record the discussion. Be sure to explain it is for you to listen to later so you can be a better listener or coach. And you can learn even more by going back to the other person after you've listened to the recording to ask her or him how he or she experienced the discussion. If you are having trouble remembering the last time someone came to you to report a problem or to get coaching that may be data worth considering right there.

If you do get a recording of your questions and comments, what do you listen for? Here are three questions you can ask yourself:

Coaching

Helping others develop the problem-solving capability required for implementing lean tools and principles and building a company culture of continuous performance improvement.

In lean management, the coach avoids telling coachees what to do because it robs them of the opportunity to think the problem through for themselves; it deprives them of ownership of the problem; and the coach realizes he or she seldom knows as much about the situation as the problem owner.

The coach's role is to use open questioning to help the coachee become more aware of what he or she knows and needs to know. The coach prompts the person being coached to consider if his or her ideas and impressions are based on fact.

Techniques that support a lean management approach to coaching include:

- Applying the scientific method of plan-do-check-act (PDCA) to a coaching cycle.
- Using questions to help the person being coached grasp the situation around the problem.
- Assessing the coachee's problem-solving capability without taking over the responsibility for solving the problem.
- Observing and providing feedback without interpretation.

from the *Lean Lexicon 5th Edition*

1. **Do I ask questions?** Of course you do, or you mean to. But do they come out as questions or statements? Do you tell when you mean to ask? We all do. It's simply in our nature. We tend to tell rather than ask in our rush to get to the answer or do what we "know" needs to be done even though we want to engage the other person and share the connection of accomplishing something together. We often state what we are thinking rather than ask what she or he knows or is thinking. That's how we are and we have to work hard at asking (and listening) rather than telling.

2. **What kind of questions do I ask?** Let's say you do ask questions. What kind are they? Are they open-ended, or closed and leading to what you believe is the situation or think ought to be done? Again, our fundamental nature has a powerful influence. We want to share understanding with another person but rather than asking what he or she knows or thinks we end up trying to lead him or her to agreeing with what we know or think. That's how a closed or leading question works. It gives the other person options for answering and forces him or her to react to the opinion, observation or idea we have in mind.

   Sometimes we are completely upfront and ask exactly what we want to know. ("We don't have time to complete this project, do we?") Sometimes we're sneaky and cue or lead the person to the answer we want. ("With so little time left I don't see any way we can complete the project on time, do you?") In both cases we're setting the other person up to react, agree or disagree with what we think – not really asking what he or she thinks.

3. **What do I ask questions about?** Let's go a step further and take a look at our "motives" when we do ask questions, even open questions. It's a matter of intent. What are we trying to learn when we ask a question? Are we trying to confirm what we already know or think, or are we sincerely opening the door to learning things we don't know or believe? Why is this important? Why does the intent behind our questions matter? The distinction is important because the other person can sense what we're doing. They can tell we are not sincerely interested in what he or she thinks. They understand we are just looking for agreement to what we think so we can get on with what we want to do.

Consider how that feels. It basically says your role is to agree and you don't have enough respect for what you might know and think to want to hear what it is. That comes through, it is sensed by the other person whether that's what we intended to communicate or not. It reduces the other person to an object we are using for our purposes. If you are in a position with power (a leader) or with expertise (a coach), the other person will usually not disagree with you. But that does not mean they agree or are engaged or you are going to get willing support for what you want to or their best effort for what you want them to do.

"Are we trying to confirm what we already know or think, or are we sincerely opening the door to learning things we don't know or believe?"

When you are by yourself later listen to the recording and write down the first 15 to 20 (or more if you want) things that you say or ask. Then go through the items and consider the following about each one (you can code as you go if you want.):

- If an item is a statement, code it, "S." If it's a question, code it "Q."
- If the item is a question, code it "O" if it is open-ended. Code it "L" if it is leading or closed (examples below).

Leading or Closed Questions usually require a Yes or No answer – even if the person goes on to explain in his/her response.

Example:

"Have you seen how the blood samples are placed on the pickup cart? " Yes, I think some were lying down."

Open-ended questions do not focus the other person on a specific aspect or idea about the Actual Place.

Example:

"What have you noticed about the cart where lab samples are left for pick up?

- If the question is based on what you think or assume about the situation, code it "M" (for me). If it is seeking to learn what the other person knows or thinks, code it "H" (for her or him.)
- Take a moment, step back and look at how your items are coded overall, then respond to the Reflection Questions that follow.

To help you reflect on your current habits as a leader or coach please estimate each of the following (Mostly means 60 percent or more.)

- Were your items mostly *Asking* or *Telling*?
- Were your questions mostly *Open-ended* or *Leading* (yes or no)?
- Were your questions based mostly on *what you were thinking* or *what you want to learn* about what the other person knew and was thinking?
- Did you mostly *confirm* things you already knew or thought or did you *learn* things you did not know?

If you are not entirely pleased with what you have learned don't be too hard on yourself. First, all it proves is that you are a normal human being. We tend to be "knowers" and act and interact with unquestioning faith in what we believe we "know." (And if we know what we need to know, why would we seek to learn what others know?) Second, you can repeat the self-check process. This is just one sample. Try again paying attention to when you ask and when you tell and see how you do.

And third, if you want to try to shift your balance between telling and asking, remember what you are dealing with. Habits might be called habits because they inhabit us. They are deeply engrained in our brain pathways and have minds of their own. They are a combination of default response and automatic pilot. They are useful because they don't take up conscious mind-share to operate. They are annoying when we want to change them because it takes a lot of conscious effort to "deprogram" ourselves by overriding the old automatic responses and creating the pathways for new ones. But it can be done. For some insight into the challenges and some possible techniques you might look at a 2012 book, *The Power of Habit*, by Charles Duhigg (Random House). ■

Real Respect Feels Like Knowing You're Being Heard

To establish or strengthen a culture of engagement and continuous improvement, leaders must understand that genuinely listening to employees is as critical as what you say to them. Here's why that's true and how to do it.

A simple fact of human nature: we listen all the time but we seldom pay real attention to what we are hearing. Our minds are busy and they are chattering to themselves all the time, including when others are standing in front of us talking. Henry David Thoreau thought it a common enough phenomenon to say, "The greatest compliment that was ever paid me was when someone asked me what I thought and attended to my answer."

June 2011 John Shook raised awareness for *Respect* as a concern for the lean community with his e-Letter, "How to Go to the Gemba: Go See, Ask Why, Show Respect." John explains the title is based on then-chairman of Toyota Fujio Cho's, frequent request of managers and senior leaders. John terms the three phrases "basic lean principles"and goes on in the e-letter to describe how he tries to carry out each one when he goes to a gemba.

Since 2011 there have been a number of blogs, articles and books written about the importance of *"showing respect"* as a key factor in creating and sustaining a lean/continuous improvement work environment. (I am tending to shy away from talking about culture now because I've learned it is generally too many ingredients in the "soup" to tackle as a whole. Work environment, on the other hand, seems to be something managers and leaders can influence by their behavior.) With full recognition of the value of John's e-letter and the efforts that followed to describe "Show Respect," I am going to focus this piece on the source of

Gemba

The Japanese term for "actual place," often used for the shop floor or any place where value-creating work actually occurs; also spelled genba.

The term often is used to stress that real improvement requires a shop-floor focus based on direct observation of current conditions where work is done. For example, standardized work for a machine operator cannot be written at a desk in the engineering office, but must be defined and revised on the gemba.

from the *Lean Lexicon 5th Edition*

the quote, Fujio Cho, and what I observed him doing as one example of showing respect to employees at gemba.

In the mid-1980s I was hired to work at Toyota's first solely-owned North American manufacturing plant, Toyota Motor Manufacturing in Kentucky. Fujio Cho was president of the plant and I had numerous opportunities to both observe him at the gemba and work with him on development of his managers and senior leaders during the six years he was at TMMK.

I want to describe what I learned from Mr. Cho about listening as a critical (maybe the most critical) way of showing respect.

Most days when Mr. Cho was onsite at the Kentucky plant he would leave his desk around 5 PM and go out somewhere on the floor by himself. I saw him many times in many different parts of the plant standing alone and out of the way simply observing. I also saw him talking with team members on the line. I could not hear what he was saying but I know from talking to several team members that he was primarily doing two things: Thanking people for their efforts and asking questions. The questions usually were along the lines of:

- "How is your job?"
- "How are you feeling?"
- "What gets in your way?"
- "What do you see that could be improved?"

It is my impression that in most cases (unless there was a safety concern) he did not answer or follow up on their concerns directly himself. He simply thanked them for sharing what they knew and thought.

The other thing I know about Mr. Cho's contact with team members in the operation I know directly from watching him. He *listened* to them. And I know he stood politely nodding as they spoke. I mean he actually listened. I could tell from a distance that he was in contact with each team member as a person and he was focused on them. Maybe it was because hearing and speaking in English was not easy for him. But I don't think so. What I remember feeling is that he was fully present and connected to the person speaking as though there was no more important use of his time. What I sensed is that he was listening with his full being. If that's what he meant by "Show Respect," it sets a tough bar for the rest of us to meet.

> "Mr. Cho was fully present and connected to the person speaking as though there was no more important use of his time."

I also had opportunities to observe Mr. Cho showing respect in a different way in another setting. I sat in many management and executive meetings reviewing plant performance and operational problems where Mr. Cho was present. He listened in those meetings, ttoo, usually for a long time before asking questions. His questions and requests tended to be:

- "What do you know about it?"
- "What have you seen?"
- "What do you think is the problem?"
- "Why do you think it's happening?"
- "What's your idea?"

These meetings often ended in much the same way. Mr. Cho would describe what he heard, add what he was concerned about from his perspective and then say, "Please think about…" "Go see and learn more about what is happening. We will talk more then."

I learned over time that what Mr. Cho was doing wasn't merely casually respectful of these managers and leaders and their ability to see, learn and think. It was his way of developing them as Toyota leaders also. Those simple requests and questions accomplished several things. They made those managers responsible for learning and thinking. They communicated he believed the managers could learn and think. And they implied he thought they were worth investing the time and effort in prompting their development.

His approach was confusing to some of the managers who came from the US auto industry. I would hear them leaving such meetings saying things like, "What do you think Mr. Cho wants? And why doesn't he tells us what he wants?"

One more piece of data from my experience with Mr. Cho and then I will return to what I learned from him about what I call "Respectful Listening," or showing respect by listening attentively. Because I was responsible for management and executive education, I had several opportunities to talk with Mr. Cho about how he wanted me to support his efforts at management development. In an earlier program I summarized some of the things he shared in his "A Memo to TMMK Managers" that I used in the session. An excerpt from what he said about Toyota managers' responsibility to communicate with and listen to their employees follows:

- **Daily communication with your subordinates is critical.** You have to be in contact with them – both listening to and speaking openly with them – every day. You must give them any important information you have about the job including the reason for changes whenever possible. This is essential so they will not be surprised and feel they are being left out of decisions that affect them.

- **For daily communication to be good daily communication it must first be good communication from the subordinate's point of view.** This is a situation in which your subordinates feel free to come to you with problems and questions. They will feel free to come to you if they trust you will listen to them with empathy, share whatever ideas and information you have and not take the job away from them and replace it with blame.

- **From the manager's point of view, good communication is timely reporting.** You are told about problems while they are still in the early stages and before it is too late to address them. Good communication with subordinates gives the manager enough information about a situation to maintain an adequate grasp of the situation. If you do not genuinely listen and get adequate information about a situation from your subordinates, you will have no idea what information or assistance they need from you." *

I can't remember if "genuinely listen" was the exact phrase Mr. Cho used but I do know he was comfortable with it in "his memo." I also know that what I observed him doing was sincerely and intently listening. Based on what I saw and heard from Mr. Cho I offer the following seven suggestions as an approach to "Respectfully Listen:"

- What shows respect as a listener?
- Being present in mind as well as body
- Connecting with the person, not just the words
- Consciously attending to what is being said
- Trying to turn down or ignore the chatter in your head
- Acknowledging what is said as it is said
- Speaking to what was said (not to the ideas popping into your mind)
- Recognizing the other person's feeling and concerns

That's a tall order but it is humanly possible in spite of our basic nature. I saw it being done. ■

Be a Better Coach: Learn to "Force" Your Team to Reflect

Sustaining a lean thinking culture requires consistent leadership and coaching that reinforces expected behaviors and practices. Here's an example of how to ensure your frontline team or supervisors complete the "check/reflect" phase of the foundational PDCA problem-solving process.

We have a plan, or an intention, or at least an idea. We go to work trying to follow our plan or act on our idea to change what we think needs to be changed. We run into problems when things don't go as we expected, so we try fixes and adjustments. At some point, we step back long enough to check what we've got to show for our effort. We may keep trying but often we decide we've got what we want (or the best we can get) and move on to the next thing. Or we decide it was a bad idea or lack of support was too much of a barrier and we give up.

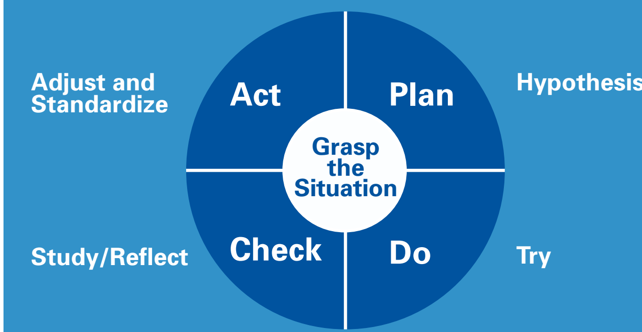
That's a pretty unflattering description of the typical implementation process, but I've seen (and done it) enough to say it's a pattern. Why does it matter if most implementation efforts end with a quick check and a decision to keep trying, declare victory, or give up? It matters because *we are missing the most important part of continuous improvement* applying the plan-do-check-act (PDCA) problem-solving method – learning from our experiment. Learning is the function of the check phase – which really means check/reflect. It's what makes continuous improvement a continuous (some say, endless) process. And it's reflection based on checking that makes the difference. In fact, as I experienced continuous improvement at Toyota, the check/reflect phase put the "continuous" in continuous improvement. Unfortunately, for many managers and leaders, check/reflect is the loneliest part of the PDCA cycle.

> "We are missing the most important part of continuous improvement applying the plan-do-check-act (PDCA) problem-solving method – learning from our experiment."

Why Humans Are Averse to Reflection

A good source for a better understanding of our underuse of reflection is Daniel Kahneman's 2015 book, *Thinking, Fast and Slow*. It reviews 30 years of research he and other behavioral and cognitive science researchers have done into how we reach judgments, make decisions, and solve problems. He integrates and summarizes these findings to suggest that we have two thinking systems. The Fast Thinking system is the more reactive. It uses the information immediately available to respond instinctively to situations and decides instantly what to do. This reaction is below the conscious level and happens before the more deliberative Slow Thinking system starts processing the situation. Slow Thinking is where we think consciously, solve problems systematically, and make reasoned judgments.

From pDpD (try, fail, try, fail) to PDCA cycle



Plan, Do, Check, Act

An improvement cycle based on the scientific method of proposing a change in a process, implementing the change, measuring the results, and taking appropriate action (see illustration). It also is known as the Deming Cycle or Deming Wheel after W. Edwards Deming, who introduced the concept in Japan in the 1950s.

The PDCA cycle has four stages:

- Plan: Determine goals for a process and needed changes to achieve them.
- Do: Implement the changes.
- Check: Evaluate the results in terms of performance.
- Act: Standardize and stabilize the change or begin the cycle again, depending on the results.

from the *Lean Lexicon 5th Edition*

Kahneman's description of our two thinking systems has strong implications for the desire to be reflective. First, the Slow system has to put the brake on the immediate response of the Fast system for reflection to happen. Second, where the Fast system acts based on whatever information it has, the Slow system looks for additional information and tries to better grasp the situation before reaching a conclusion. Then the Slow system works systematically through that information to reach a reasoned decision. This takes time and we are usually faced with pressure to do something immediately. It is not that the Fast thinking system is bad. In fact, in emergency situations, its intuitive or instinctive reactions can save us. But the *Fast system is our default thinking system* and it takes conscious effort to manage and assess its responses.

There is an additional factor from neuroscience research that makes the challenge of being reflective even more of a challenge. The conscious thinking part of our brains, the pre-frontal cortex, is relatively small but consumes 20% of the body's energy. In other words, conscious thought, as opposed to instinctive response, takes a lot of effort and that brain power takes a lot of energy. The body is always trying to conserve energy and tends to be stingy with how much it lets us use. Its first reaction to our effort at Slow thinking is to resist using the energy to do it. Summing up these indications from cognitive, behavioral, and neuroscience research: systematic checking and reflecting do not seem to be natural acts for us humans.

Force Reflection and 4 Keys to Coaching

Fujio Cho, (former chairman and CEO, Toyota Motor Corporation) from whom I learned much of what I practice as a coach when I worked with him, was certainly not a cognitive science researcher, but he had deep insight into how our minds work and how we learn. After a couple of years observing him asking managers and executives to think about something or go see something and questioning them about what they thought or saw later, I asked if he would describe what he was doing. He shared four things he tries to do when he is coaching or helping develop someone:

1. **"Give the person the responsibility as his or her own."** Simply put, in a work setting we generally learn to help solve problems. No skin in the game, no need to learn.

2. **"Let them think, let them try."** We learn primarily from our experience. We can read or be told how things are or what to do but until we have experience working with an idea or a practice (experiment with it), it is generally not real in a way we can see or judge how it can help us solve problems.

3. **"Help them see."** When people (including me) reported back to Mr. Cho after a "go-see" assignment, he asked them questions. What he generally got was a summary statement or a claim about what was going on, or what was needed. And he would reply, "What did you see that makes you think that's what is happening? What else did you see or hear? How do you know that's what is going on? What makes you think that's what we should do?" He was trying to counter our very human tendency to default to Fast Thinking by rushing to a conclusion, judgment, and solution. He wanted to develop us as people who recognized that Toyota expects thinking and problem-solving that is based on a grasp of the actual conditions of situations before deciding how to act.

4. **"Force reflection."** The reflection part I understood. I was aware that in Toyota a planned activity or project was not completed until there was a reflection on plan versus actual. I knew about the Japanese practice of hansei, self-reflection. I was aware of American educator John Dewey's insistence that reflective thinking on experience was how we learned best. It was the "force" part I didn't understand. Now I understand why he used such a strong term as "force." Reflecting on the outcome of our intentions and the impact of efforts and why things turned out as they did is not something we do naturally unless we have to. Unless we are "forced" by something or someone on the outside.

Forcing Teams to Reflect

My first experience coaching PDCA problem solving was with supervisors and team members on the plant floor in Toyota. They had a tendency to name a problem then jump to a solution This was especially the case with many skilled maintenance people. "I've seen this before," they'd say. "I know what needs to be done; let's just do it." There was little point asking them to describe what they knew about what was happening or to explain why they thought their solutions were the right ones. So I shifted *to asking them to help me understand what was happening and how they knew what to do*. "Let's go see. Show me what you think is happening," I'd ask. Sometimes we saw what they expected. More often, we saw things they did not expect that called their solutions into question.

> "If you do not genuinely listen and get adequate information about a situation from your subordinates, you will have no idea what information or assistance they need from you."

Whatever occurred in this "go see" process gave me an opportunity to coach using reflection. If the problem condition was what they expected, I could prompt recall by asking how what we saw this time was like what they had seen before. And what did they see this time that gave them confidence their solution would work this time also. If we did not see what they expected, I asked how exactly what they saw was different from what they had seen before or expected and why they thought it was different. I also asked what change in their solution would be necessary this time and why. And I usually asked what they might have learned about problem-solving from what we found.

Next, I learned to use reflection proactively rather than reactively. Frequently those who had an instant solution in mind either did not see anything at the problem situation that caused them to question their assumption or they simply could not let go of their solution regardless of what questions were raised. Cognitive neuroscience research has shown that arguing with someone who has a "fixed" belief generally makes them more committed to the idea. Eventually recognizing this intuitively, I tried a different tack.

I would say, "Okay, you believe it will work. Let's see if we can't learn more than whether it worked or didn't work by trying it. What does work – or didn't work – mean? Let's be explicit going into execution about exactly what we are changing, why, and what we expect to see different that will make performance better." In other words, I was asking them to do a simple design of experiment. Many soon recognized that I was asking them to explain their ideas for changes and improvements in a simple form of A3 thinking.

It was after these experiments that I really began to understand why Mr. Cho said, "force reflection." The tendency of most people I was coaching was to say, "Okay, that worked, what do we do next?" Or, "Okay, that didn't work, what do we try next?" Without someone *insisting that we stop and look at what did happen* and what didn't happen in these experiments, they would have been just trial and error. My role as coach was to ask one of two questions.

1. If the change worked, I asked, "What do we know about exactly why the change worked and made performance better, so we can keep doing it."

2. If the change did not produce the expected outcome, I asked, "The idea for the change made sense, what did we miss? What did we miss in what we saw and thought was going on? What did we miss in what we did to execute the change? Or what did we miss in what we expected would happen?"

Through this kind of *"forced" reflection, we gradually built a foundation of learning* about the problem situations we were trying to improve and our problem solving and execution processes. Again many soon picked up that as a *coach I wasn't going to accept that it worked or it didn't work*. I was going to expect them to have thought about why or why not and what they would do differently next time. ■

Be a Better Coach; Learn to "Force" Reflection Part 2: Forcing Managers and Execs to Reflect

How to hold senior-level leaders accountable for expected behaviors and practices, such as the PDCA process' "check/reflect" phase.

Having been somewhat effective in coaching problem-solving groups (including Quality Circles), I was eventually asked to "talk" with managers and a few senior leaders. These requests seldom came from the managers themselves. I quickly realized I had to use a different approach from the ones I used with teams and supervisors on the shop floor.

In most cases, the managers were struggling in some area and a specific recent event prompted the "suggestion" they talk with me. I took those events as a starting point for coaching. The managers knew why we were talking and they expected they were going to have to talk, generally reluctantly, about the events or their areas of struggle. My coaching was all humble inquiry (even though I didn't know the term at this point) using a sequence of questions similar to the following:

- What's your understanding of what we need to talk about?
- What do you recall about the action or decision we're here to discuss?
- What were you trying to do when you did or said that?
- What did you expect would happen?
- What do you know about what did happen?
- What's your sense of why things did not turn out as you expected?
- What's your biggest takeaway from the situation?
- What are you thinking you'll do with that insight in the future?

I did not say, "Let's reflect on what happened." In fact, I seldom used the word. I simply asked questions to prompt their recall and thinking to see what sense they would make of their experiences themselves. I know they were expecting to be judged and criticized or at least advised. While responding to the questions may not have been comfortable for these managers, I wanted them to understand doing the thinking was their responsibility. I wanted to communicate: you thought and got yourself into the situation; I am going to try to help you think through for yourself what you can learn from it and how you can move beyond it. *Meaningful reflection is only possible when we feel reasonably safe* and have enough sense of self-direction that we are able to learn.

> "Meaningful reflection is only possible when we feel reasonably safe and have enough sense of self-direction that we are able to learn."

The next stage in my evolution as a coach again involved the use of design of experiments but in this case, it was with managers and individuals who wanted to change behaviors or learn new skills. Generally, the opportunity for this kind of coaching comes only when an ongoing relationship with the coachee has developed. And it requires that the coachee has indicated the desire to change or the intention of trying something new or different. The approach consists of jointly describing a situation in which the coachee will try a different response or a new behavior followed by reflection on what happened after the coachee has tried changing his or her response or used a different behavior in a similar situation.

The two steps of this approach are similar to what I learned to do with teams and individuals who had a solution or improvement in mind they were sure would work. I ask managers and leaders I am coaching to be specific about what they are going to do, why, and what they expect as the outcome. Having the idea to change an approach or try a different behavior is relatively easy. *Turning it into a growth experience requires being explicit* about exactly what you are going to change and how and why you expect to get a different response. That lays the foundation for prompting reflection by asking questions such as the following:

- What did you do compared to what you intended to do?
- What was the response versus what you expected?
- Why do you think the response was the same or different from what you expected?
- What did you learn from how the other person or people reacted?
- What will you do the same or differently next time?

There is nothing magic about reflection even when facilitated by questions like the ones above. It does not change behavior, thinking or outcome by itself. There has to be a conscious effort to use what is learned from reflection and translate it into intentional action. But there are no guarantees of success. Every attempt to make a change is an experiment. But every attempt creates a new opportunity to reflect and learn.

I have shared how I learned to use reflection as a coach as an example of the benefit of reflecting. In most cases, I learned what to do as a coach before I learned why. I only got more consciously competent as I grew to understand why some things worked for me and some didn't through reflection. By understanding the reasons I wanted to do or not do certain things I was better able to decide what to do in new situations and my ability to perform confidently and effectively increased. It is the same with problem-solving and continuous improvement. *It is the learning that results from reflection, not just the doing that drives continuous improvement.* ■

Faculty Highlight

David Verble
Partner
Lean Transformations Group

David has been a performance improvement consultant and leadership coach since 2000. Prior to that, he worked for Toyota in North America for 14 years, first as an internal change agent and later as a manager of human resource development at the plant and North American levels.

He has been on the workshop faculty of the Lean Enterprise Institute for eleven years and has done presentations and workshops to support a number of the LEI affiliates in the Lean Global Network. David has worked with clients in manufacturing, healthcare, finance, and higher education in North America, Europe, Asia, and Australia.

His work focuses on supporting clients in process improvement, development of lean management systems and practices, strategic thinking and problem solving, and leadership coaching for managers and executives.

David is a partner in the Lean Transformations Group and is based in Lexington, KY, where he works through Verble, Worth & Verble.

About The Lean Enterprise Institute

The Lean Enterprise Institute, Inc, was founded in 1997 by management expert James P. Womack, PhD, as a nonprofit research, education, publishing, and conferencing company. As part of its mission to advance lean thinking around the world, LEI supports the Lean Global Network (leanglobal.org), the Lean Education Academic Network (teachinglean.org), and the Healthcare Value Network (healthcarevalueleaders.org).

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