

# INCH WIDE MILE DEEP

CREATE A LEAN CULTURE THAT ACCELERATES PROBLEM SOLVING, FOSTERS GROWTH AND IMPROVES COMPANY CULTURE BY PROVIDING FOCUS AND A DISPROPORTIONATE AMOUNT OF SUPPORT.



**JFlinch**

**H**ow do you transform a 50,000-person, or even a 1,000-person organization?

You do it one heart and one mind at a time.  
But that requires a strategy.

Twenty-three years ago while building the Chrysler Operating System, we engaged tiny pockets of the organization in a strategy called the “Lean Learning Line.” This strategy is also called “model areas,” “learning laboratories,” “deep dives,” and I’ve often called them “inch-wide, mile-deep.” There is no single right name. However, given the strategy’s relative success compared to massive training and kaizen-blitz rollouts, it is still surprisingly underutilized.



### What is it?

This approach is about building a lean culture of every person, every day; it’s about problem-solving and making improvements in small areas by providing focus and a disproportionate amount of support. The purpose is learning while making the team better, or better yet, learning how to make the team better.

My first effort with this strategy engaged 150 people over five months. We implemented over 900 separate improvements from those team members. We reduced downtime by 98%. We

generated believers in everyone from the team members to the factory manager to the union representatives who watched over us closely. We generated standards. We built capability.



### What is it not?

Don’t call it a pilot. The reason is that most pilots are used to determine if something works or not. If you treat this as a proof point, then you won’t have the patience and persistence to fight your way through problems along the way.

It’s also not a project. Projects have a defined end. If you focus on just accomplishing a result instead of building capability, then you won’t build anything sustainable. Results still matter, but they are an outcome and not the purpose of a model area.



### How do you select your area?

There is no magic formula. A balance must be struck in regard to the size or boundaries. Too small and it’s not relevant. It should be challenging. If you don’t have anything to overcome, you won’t learn anything through challenge. One group I saw simply 5S’d their office supplies closet. It was well done, with visual management, 5S and standard work. But people couldn’t learn from the example because they couldn’t relate to it.

Too big, and you will struggle to gain any traction at all. Too big likely depends on the size of your organization. If you have a 30-person company, then a 20-person deep dive is a lot. When I was in a 5,000-person factory, we engaged a 150-person team across three shifts. While it seemed like a lot, it also felt very small compared to the site. It was significant enough, however, for people to relate to, and lead to expansion.

There are a lot of other criteria to consider. The most important ingredient is engaged leadership. If you select an area with the purpose of convincing that team's leadership that this is worth pursuing, you will face resistance in every step. While this might not be about a leap of faith, it is a commitment, and you must have local leadership willing to work through the challenges.



### **Who is the customer?**

The team going through a transformation is the focal point, but they are not the customer. The rest of the company is the customer. If this were just about transforming the team at hand, then you would just repeat this strategy team by team. However, that is a very expensive and resource-intensive approach.

The key to success is to focus on what everyone else will get out of the effort. Best practices for teaching and applying lean should be developed and be ready to share with others. Internal benchmarking allows people to see a working example. Leader immersion helps them experience the culture. Consider the outputs before you just charge ahead doing “lean stuff.”



### **Create the right environment.**

You are asking a team to get out of their comfort zone and get ahead of everyone else. They likely didn't really sign up for that challenge. You must create a safe environment for them to experiment. Safe doesn't just mean physical safety, but emotional safety and professional or job safety. Without that safety, it is difficult to ask people to jump off the proverbial cliff without a safety harness.



### **Clarify roles.**

For most of the team that is going on this adventure, their job is apply lean skills and methods to solve the problem in front of them and create better results. That includes the leadership roles within the team. They can't stand aside and “allow” their team to engage; they must engage as well. They must learn how to change their work to support problem-solving and continuous improvement. Often, the front-line supervision has the most dramatic

changes to go through. And someone has to be responsible for the learning journey itself—owning the change management, including the roadmap for which methods to introduce and how quickly to introduce them.



### Have a roadmap.

Since the purpose is to create a model of what your lean journey should look like for everyone, you need a clear picture of what you are trying to create, and a roadmap to get there. Most roadmaps are primarily a sequence of the methods, tools, and systems to plan to deploy: team huddles, waste elimination, standardization, problem-solving, leader standard work, and so on. The sequence does matter, quite a lot. For example, I witnessed one organization deploy five different methods that were designed to make problems visible, but they hadn't learned one method to solve those problems. The result was list upon list of exposed problems without much progress in making them better, leading to frustration.

Because this is a learning journey, it is important to be flexible with the roadmap. Like a real roadmap, you might run into a roadblock and have to take a detour. You want to be able to take that detour but still end up at your destination eventually. That roadblock could be a change in business conditions, a change in

leadership, or newly identified needs that encourage you to move specific lean methods up in the timeline.



### Prepare to export the knowledge.

As covered in the previous column, the purpose of an inch-wide, mile-deep model area isn't just to transform that target application area, but to be a beacon of learning for the rest of the organization. To accomplish that purpose, you must have a plan for exporting that knowledge. What most organizations do—which almost always fails—is to wait for the end of the process and then examine how to export it. I have visited dozens of companies where they had deployed such a strategy, but it either died or they could not even remember what area they were focusing on. The reason is they stopped with creating the model area and failed to have a plan to leverage it.

There are two primary vehicles to export that knowledge: artifacts and people. Artifacts could be systems of work, training materials, reference guides, and even the roadmap used itself. They are a “starter kit” for another team of function to begin their own deep dive.

People is a little more complicated. Most efforts try to share the knowledge through people after the fact. This is like visiting a museum; it's not

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quite like the real thing. Witnessing a model area and experiencing it are two different ways to learn, with the latter far more effective.

Have a plan for experiencing the journey for others who would benefit from the learning. Then your model area becomes a catalyst for change.



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