Lean is about Behaviors

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Most management philosophies have their best day on their first day. Someone puts together a book or an idea, and that is when it is the most pure and inspired. From there, it gets picked apart and hijacked and distorted, until it is hardly recognizable. Lean is also unrecognizable from its beginnings, but for a different reason. The body of knowledge is always evolving, sometimes through studying Toyota's own evolution, sometimes from the evolution of understanding from Toyota, and more and more often from evolving our own practices through experimentation.

That evolution, like real evolution, comes in fits and spurts and is often very messy. New insights are confused with final conclusions, and adopted with a vigor that suggests we finally have the answers we're looking for. This happened for a protracted period of time with value stream mapping, following the publication of the book Learning to See. With a lack of breadth in the body of knowledge, value stream maps were seen everywhere, with several people declaring it as the only true indicator of a lean organization. Yet "learning to map" is not actually "learning to see" and many organizations didn't improve enough, and for some not even in the right direction.

I had a General Manager tell me after his team had completed his value stream map that "if it weren't for our customers or suppliers, we'd be in pretty good shape." He had not learned to see, and ultimately did not improve much. A less extreme example can be seen in the popularity of Kata. For certain, it is a useful methodology, yet it is not even practiced by Toyota but is an interpretation of their thinking. Is kata the beginning, middle, and end of lean? Certainly not, but many have adopted it as such. Eventually, it will be better understood in the broader context.

In dealing with the evolution of lean, we must take ownership over our own learning and application. Nothing is final, and nothing fits all situations. We should learn from books, learn from other companies, learn from teachers, but ultimately, we must own our learning and knowledge. A common question I get is "where is lean going to go next?", but my never-satisfying response is "where is your learning going to take you next?" So, will lean evolution happen to us, or will our evolution happen to lean?

Behaviors are greater than tools

The most important aspect of lean evolution has been the acknowledgement of the role of behaviors as central to a lean organization. I don't just say this because I've been at the forefront of helping people understand this shift, but if you look at everything from the education and writing to the practice and application, lean behaviors have been far better understood as a key component of success.

Behaviors are often behind the failure modes of our lean tools. I discuss one of my early experiences with behaviors disrupting effective tools in a chapter I wrote for Mark Graban's book *Practicing Lean.*

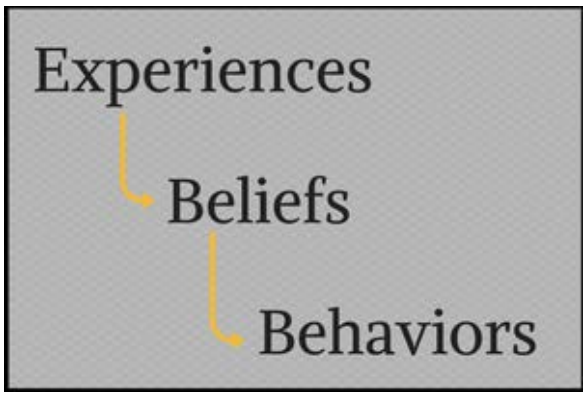
Let's use a couple of examples to explain why. Take 5S - what could be simpler or more common. We organize our work. We get rid of the stuff we don't need. We organize the stuff we do need so it is easy to access, and most importantly, we can identify abnormalities in our environment early. That sounds pretty simple, but organizing through 5S once is pretty easy, and most every organization will acknowledge that sustaining it is much harder. Why? Because the event to implement it is forced, it is facilitated. Sustaining requires an understanding and commitment. It requires that we value the stability that 5S provides. It requires that we consider other people who share the same work environment as our internal customer, and how we leave things for them is a service that we provide them. And it requires that we value having a common way or method more than we value our personal preference.

Without those beliefs and the behaviors that accompany them, the procedures of 5S will not be enough. Certainly, auditing is useful. It holds those who don't share those values accountable to the standard, and it sends a leadership signal to those who have the right behaviors that we value and support your efforts. Auditing itself, however, can be done as a way to get a passing grade, or can be treated as a means for accountability and leadership signals. It is still all about the behavior.

Problem solving is another excellent opportunity to distinguish between the tools and the behaviors. Regardless of your chosen methods for problem solving, they are often represented as a template, but the value is in the work. How many of your problem solving templates are filled out after the conclusions are drawn, or after the solutions are implemented. But a fully completed template is often more valued than a group of people who worked white board and never completed the template. I don't mean to say that filling out the template isn't important, but it isn't the reason for teaching people problem solving methodologies. The purpose is to encourage deep thinking about our problems, why they exist, and how we go about solving them. It is the behavior that matters.

Experiences, beliefs, behaviors, and lean

Experiences create our beliefs which drive our behaviors. So, if behaviors are so important, what do we do about it. We can certainly dig much deeper into this topic than in this blog post, but the simplest definition is that our experiences determine our beliefs, and our beliefs determine our behaviors. If we want to change our



behaviors, or those of people around us, then we need to create experiences that affect how we think. We cannot just think our way to lean behaviors. We need understanding, practice, and internalization.

While getting into the methods for creating those experiences will be for another deep-dive, the important aspect is that you need a deliberate effort to change behavior. It requires more than will. But start with yourself. What experiences do you need to have? You need a teacher, to learn, to understand.

You need to practice, like any skill from riding a bike to tax law, requires practice. This is the reason that doctors talk of practicing medicine, and why Mark Graban titled the book he edited Practicing Lean. We are all practicing.

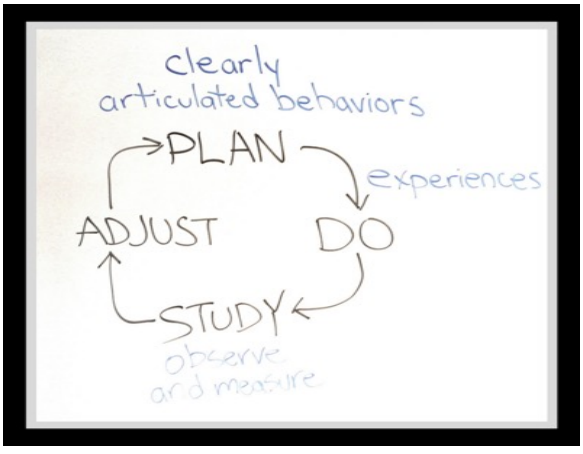
And we need reflection. Like a great quarterback or soccer manager or pitcher who watches film of themselves for self-evaluation and improvement, we must do that for our practice so that we understand not just what works and what doesn't, but why. Have a plan, because experiences create our beliefs which drive our behaviors. But, which behaviors really matter? And have you created experiences that drive understanding, practice, and internalization.

Clearly articulate the lean behaviors that matter to you

Most cultures are accidental. They are created through the somewhat random walk of experiences that we encounter. Those who grew up during the Great Depression developed a sense of thriftiness and conservation. Those who had a jerk of a boss either become one themselves or try to make up for their failures. One leader who is always is late for meetings sends a message that being late for meetings is not only acceptable but considered a positive trait.

To create a culture through experiences, you must first articulate the culture that you desire. Don't end up with an accidental culture. You must articulate the culture you want. Clearly define the behaviors you desire. They should not be generic, motherhood-and-apple-pie behaviors, such as respect and integrity. They should also not be outcomes, such as excellence or winning. They should be articulate, observable behaviors.

In general, it is easier to enact a positive behavior than it is to suppress a negative one. For example, it is likely more effective to focus on systematic problem solving than on avoiding reactive firefight. You might end up with the same outcome, but you have a more probable path to success. Ensure they connect to where you want to go as an organization, not next year, but over the next 3 years or 10 years.



You must define the culture you desire. Do not let your culture happen by accident.

Deliberate culture change requires an approach to that change. It requires the same discipline of PDSA, or Plan Do Study Adjust, that we use to make improvements of any other sort. Part of Plan is the articulation of the desired behaviors. I need to know my target condition. The other part of the plan is what changes and actions I plan to take to achieve those desired behaviors. Then the Do phase, which is execution of the plan. What most skip, mostly because it is difficult, is the Study phase. Study is more than simply understanding whether or not we've achieved the desired culture. It is pursuing the understanding as to why you are getting the result you want. This can be done primarily through either observation or measurement, or a combination of both. Both require a framework, both require going deeper than a simple yes or no. When we understand why we're getting the current results, we can then move on to Adjust our Plans accordingly. The point is, treat improvement of your culture with the same learning-orientation and rigor that you should be treating your process improvement.