



We are the champions

Successful lean initiatives are often driven internally by a dedicated champion. Rich Weissman looks at the roles of lean champions and how they can positively impact lean

Passion. Drive. Leadership. Commitment. Enthusiasm. The sports world is full of examples of athletes who have worked hard, struggled, and sacrificed to lead their teams to victory. The glare of the television lights reveals their champagne soaked hair, their smiles, and their hugs of family, fellow players and team owners. The memories of these scenes are often etched in our collective memories. We often define these athletes, and teams, as champions.

Yet champions can also be found in more mundane surroundings, absent the champagne and television lights, but often still the target of adulation, support, and gratitude of company employees, management, customers, and stockholders. Successful lean manufacturing programs often have a champion, the person with the passion, drive, leadership, training, and commitment to lead a company to improved operational and financial performance, as well as increased customer satisfaction. Lean champions are often the most important part of lean initiative, offering a blend of personality and technical ability that provides a rallying point for fellow employees. Lean champions have varied responsibilities and can come from different areas of the organization. Often they are members of the senior management team with operational responsibilities. Sometimes they are CEOs or company presidents. Other times they are at the vice president or general manager level. But sometimes champions come from lower levels of the organizational chart, including first-line supervisors or department leads. While it may be harder to affect change from lower levels of the firm, their passion and commitment may be enough to generate the enthusiasm necessary from all levels of the firm to successfully lead the lean effort. Champions are certainly more than process improvement cheerleaders. They are often technically proficient project managers who completely understand the underlying business issues that lean needs to address. Additionally, they set and maintain the goals of the improvement projects, making sure that they are aligned with the overall business priorities and objectives. Lean champions also act as coaches and teachers, educating the entire organization, including the supply base, on the importance of lean. They are also facilitators and negotiators, helping to smooth out internal manufacturing and organizational issues, and keep lean initiatives on track.

Perhaps the most important element of being a lean champion is the ability to stimulate and motivate the workforce. Above all, successful lean champions seem to work well with all levels of employees and navigate through organizational minefields. "Corporate cultures have an undercurrent that can destroy many good intentions," says Susan McGinley, a Lexington, MA-based operations consultant supporting the semiconductor processing industry. "Lean cuts across many corporate boundaries and it is difficult to get employees onboard without them seeing the eventual benefits."

McGinley sees a lean champion as an executive level person with a clear vision, good communication skills, and a relentless tenacity to implement corporate wide change that will improve everyday work life and the corporate bottom line. She sees that lean philosophies are simple, yet implementation is next to impossible without a lean champion. "The most successful lean implementation I've seen was initiated at the executive level and championed by the vice president of operations," says McGinley. "The least successful never got past the planning stage."

They didn't have a lean champion."

In some companies there are several lean champions, with some having their foundations in related disciplines. "Our lean champions are a bit more broad-based than in some organizations," says Dick Rappoli, manufacturing programs manager for military engines for Lynn, MA-based General Electric. "We employ Lean Event Teams to work on specific projects, and these teams often consist of from three to 12 employees. The team is usually led by a six sigma Black Belt." Rappoli sees these leaders as lean champions who are technically proficient and have significant leadership skills. "We have many lean champions working on many projects," says Rappoli. "In our environment, they cannot be afraid to think outside the box and try new things." He adds that the Lean Event Teams are designed to be cross functional and report into a senior leadership team, but they remain with a great deal of focus. "We may not call the leaders lean champions per se, but their training, focus, and commitment certainly put them squarely in that role."

"A lean champion is the heart and soul of the organization," says Larry Coté, president and CEO of the Ontario, Canada-based lean consultancy Lean Advisors. "Trying to complete a successful lean transformation without a lean champion can be as frustrating as trying to put a puzzle together without having the picture of the finished product—it can work but it is very difficult and takes so much longer." Coté sees a lean champion as someone with the passion, dedication, and persistence to lead the participants in all levels of the organization.

"Lean champions need to communicate and influence up and down the hierarchy without being distracted or swayed by the naysayer," says Coté. "They know the importance of following a proper implementation plan in order to get everyone moving in the same direction with the same vision." Coté feels a lean champion doesn't have to be an expert in lean, but they do need to recognize when they need assistance and where to get help when they need it. This is where senior level management must step in. "Whenever the lean champion runs into resistance or a problem requiring their influence, they need to step in without hesitation to do whatever it takes to reinforce the direction and activities detailed in the implementation plan. "A lean transformation is doomed to failure unless there is this special someone leading the charge and having the control and authority to complete the plan," says Coté.

One of those special people is leading the lean charge for the Royal Canadian Mint, one of Coté's lean clients. "I may be an untraditional lean champion," says Craig Szelestowski, the vice president of human resources and lean enterprise for the mint. Using such lean concepts as value stream mapping, kaizen, and just-in-time, the mint has been able to increase efficiency in coin production and also reduce time to market in its important retail commemorative coin business. "We have manufacturing issues just like any other company," says Szelestowski. "We are a vertically integrated company that includes the largest gold refining and bullion operation in Canada. We need to be focused on manufacturing efficiencies, time to market and cost. Lean helps us with that." He notes that the mint has gotten so efficient that they are now doing some contract manufacturing as well. "We feel that our employees are the most important part of our lean initiatives, and as the head of human resources I have a unique relationship with them." Szelestowski adds that the mint has a no layoff policy which has contributed to increased employee involvement and a buy-in to lean initiatives. "We need to manage the people side of lean and work through the issues of change management," he says. "We call it the cultural value stream." He credits the mint's senior management for an effective lean process. Its CEO is the organization's overall leader, but Beverley Lepine, its chief operating officer, is the driving force behind lean initiatives. "There is accountability on all of our product lines and she keeps us focused."

Companies with less mature lean implementations may have the most need for a champion to help them through the process. "Champions are critical especially in companies that are first time adopters of lean," says Tony Paolini, a principal in the Dallas office of management consultant PRTM. Paolini, who has first-hand experience in client based lean implementations, sees the ideal champion as one who has a significant degree of influence and respect within the organization. "A good champion has an intellectual curiosity and a desire to understand what lean is," he says. "A champion needs to be more than just output-based. They really need to understand the total effect of lean on the organization."

One of Paolini's lean implementations was with a manufacturing client in the telecommunications industry that had three international manufacturing sites. "The lean champion was the vice

president of manufacturing,” said Paolini. “He participated in lean training, launched the lean implementation teams in all three manufacturing facilities, held regular conference calls with the marketing teams, participated in design reviews, and was present at factory conversions.” Paolini adds that the lean champion was available at all of the product line launches. “He was the go-to guy in all cases. He drove the corrective actions and understood the need to stay the course.”

“A lean champion believes in it,” says Bob Muth, the general manager for the Hanover, PA-based roller bearing and seal manufacturer SKF USA. “It is important to sell lean principles across the board.” Muth, a lean champion himself, feels that a lean champion needs to be a good communicator, a people person, and one who can convert the nonbelievers.

While people skills are important, a lean champion needs to have some level of a technical background, says Muth. “It is best suited for someone with an industrial engineering background with experience in capacity, manufacturing analysis, and time studies.” Muth feels the role of the lean champion gets easier over time. “SKF is very mature in our lean journey and we are continually working to improve our performance every year. Lean is part of our overall business plan.”

Lean champions are leaders. They bring focus and enthusiasm to a process that can be both exciting and frustrating at the same time. The lean champion needs a blend of the right personality, technical expertise, a solid belief in the principles of lean and strong management support. But they cannot be successful by themselves. Successful lean implementations take strong organizational collaboration. The champion may lead, but a strong team is essential for success.