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Is Lean More Than Kaizen Events?

When to use the Lean Six Sigma Project Format

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December 2009



Abstract

Many Lean Consultants promote Kaizen Events (a.k.a. Rapid Improvement Events) or Kaizen Blitzes as the method of implementing Lean. They are proponents of this method because that is how Toyota does it, and Toyota founded Lean. What these consultants overlook is that Toyota has 50+ years of experience with Lean and can do it faster than less experienced companies. In this paper we will discuss the problems with Kaizen Events and an alternate method (the Quick-Project-Format) of implementing Lean Six Sigma that achieves greater, more sustainable improvements.

Lean Six Sigma Quick-Project-Format

- 4 – 8 Weeks in duration
 - 1 – 2 days per week
 - Team members return to work for the remainder of the week or use time to gather data and communicate updates to department employees
- Project Phases
 - Define
 - Analyze / Mapping
 - Design
 - Rollout Plan
- Education/workshop on day 1 of each week, if needed
- Report out to Business/Executive Sponsor
- 2 – 6 month Implementation Rollout
 - Monthly Team follow-up meetings / conference calls

The Lean Six Sigma Quick-Project-Format works on projects that need a few weeks to complete the improvement. This can be due to many reasons.

- The scope of the project may cross multiple departments
 - Cannot be broken down into smaller parts or the process will be sub-optimized
- The team will need to gather, analyze and quality-check data before making critical decisions
 - Performance data or Time Study data
- The small Lean Six Sigma Team needs to get input from company associates who are not on the team, to ensure buy-in



In all of these cases the changes made by the Lean Six Sigma Team need to be well thought-out. Decision-making cannot be rushed!

Projects that would require a 4 – 8 week duration versus a one week Kaizen event include:

- Customer profitability analysis
 - Politically sensitive data and decisions
- Product rationalization
 - Important to use correct data or highly negative decisions can be made
- Order to Delivery streamlining
 - Processes that touch multiple departments
- Human Resource processes
 - Often involving legal issues
- Warehouse layout
 - A lot of work required
- Flow Manufacturing / Kanban Materials Management
 - Where parts, supplied and components are shared by different product families and therefore different Flow Cells
- Supply Chain improvements
 - Involving suppliers

Kaizen Event Format

Day 1 – Lean Education

Day 2 – Analyze current process and begin improvements

Day 3 – Continue improvements

Day 4 – Document new standards

Day 5 – Present results and celebrate

Failings of the Kaizen Event Method

- Action Item List not completed
- Rushed decisions
- Incomplete time studies
- Insufficient time for non-Kaizen participants to “buy in” and take post Kaizen ownership
- Data not quality checked
- Poor record of sustaining

Kaizen events are meant to start and finish a Lean project in one week. In many cases the Friday celebration is just creating an action item list. When the energy and focus of the Kaizen week is over, this action item list often lingers and the action items never get



completed. The result is that actual savings/improvements are far less than the calculated savings.

Because of the 1 week format, and the fact that the team is working full time on this project, decisions are often rushed. Allocating 1 day to do time studies or gather other critical data is just not enough. In 1 week, a few product families get time studied but not all. Data is gathered, but it is not verified as being accurate. There is no time to get additional input from employees that are knowledgeable about this process but are not on the team.

The result is often a solution that is “shoved down people’s throats”. When this happens, employees who were not on the team will naturally push-back and avoid taking ownership. The result is an un-sustained process. Actual results never equal the theoretical results.

Anyone involved in Kaizen events will tell you that sustaining is the hardest part. But in the Kaizen process it gets the least focus.

What Kaizen Events Are Good At

Kaizen events can be successful. There are two circumstances where we have been successful using the one week events to improve processes.

First is when the process being analyzed is very focused, affects only one or two departments and does not impact other parts of the company. We used a Kaizen Event at a Retailer who was looking at eliminating redundant paperwork in the Procurement department. This involved primarily just Buyers and Administrators in Procurement. The improvements the Lean Team made were eliminating printing and copying paper. This didn’t affect other departments in the company.

Another example of a focused Kaizen Event is reducing machine set-up time using Quickchangeover tools. This improvement is focused on one machine and can largely get done, while communicating with all operators involved, in one week.

Kaizen Events can also be affective for 5S Visual Management implementations. This involves labeling, organizing and sorting the workplace. We would usually involve most of the people who work in the area involved. This type of Lean tool can usually get done in one week (if the area is properly scoped out in advance) and does not have numerous additional action items that need to be completed after the week is over.



Benefits of the Lean Six Sigma Quick-Project-Format

- Breaks in the project (non project meeting-days) allow time to gather, quality check and refine data
- Breaks allow time to present current state process flow maps or time study results to additional department employees who are not on the Lean Team
- Duration of the project provides enough time to complete time studies of all product families
- Provides necessary time for stakeholders to adequately communicate their thoughts and assimilate the impact of the effort
- The last week is dedicated to creating a control plan (how solution will be integrated into the business) and rollout plan

The key to the success of the Project Format is the duration of the project and the breaks in between meeting-days. The duration allows for a completeness of analysis, communication of the improvements and a design that works and is well received by all department employees.

The breaks give Lean Team Members time to catch up with their regular jobs and work externally of the Lean Six Sigma Project to gather the data and communicate the current state with fellow department employees.

The last week is dedicated to thinking about Sustainment. This involves Control Plans, or how the process improvement will be integrated into the business process. The team also builds a Rollout Plan (schedule) to show how changes will be sequenced into the business to ensure testing and acceptance.

An example of a Control Plan and Rollout Plan for a SKU Rationalization project is shown below.

Sometimes going a little bit slower achieves real results faster.