

# Collaboration is the key to unlocking continuous improvement

*Collaboration is a structured recursive process where two or more people work together toward a common goal. Typically an intellectual endeavour that is creative in nature; by sharing knowledge, learning, and building consensus.*  
— Wikipedia

One of the most commonly overlooked precepts of lean manufacturing is the principle of collaboration. It never ceases to amaze us in our consulting and coaching roles with clients undergoing a transformation to lean is how they overlook the importance of establishing collaborative relationships within and across their organizations and both up and downstream from their organizations. Collaboration is merely assumed, not addressed as key to their lean journey. Yet without the collaborative gene, the lean transformation journey deteriorates to nothing more than a set of tools and methods providing mediocre results at best and very little likelihood of sustaining even those small gains. The reason why collaboration is so important lies in the fundamentals of “lean” itself.

Lean is all about people. Our objective is to create a sustainable culture of continuous improvement. This is only doable if we can harness the hearts and minds of our associates, no matter where they reside in our organization. Only by creating an environment that encourages collaboration will we ever enlist the sum of all of the creative genius that lies within our organization. Pulling this together is key to greatness. It is the key to finding innovative solutions to productivity challenges and then taking them to even greater improvements in our ongoing journey of continuous improvement.

So why is collaboration so important? Let’s look at our operations from a number of perspectives. First, at the cell level we are looking to capture the ongoing day-by-day improvements that can be generated by an involved and



committed workforce. Such team dynamics only exist where we have a collaborative, no-blame environment. Next, consider the individual value streams within our organizations. Here we look to overcome the traditional boundaries of departments, career paths, functional disciplines and internal empires to create a harmonious, focused team effort to continuously improve our productivity, quality, and overall customer service. Without the ability to collaborate, tearing down the traditional walls separating our in-bred departmentalized thinking is impossible.


From the corporate strategic level, taking our lean initiatives outside our organization by looking both upstream at our supply chain and downstream via our customers, requires collaboration. To get to this stage takes time, perseverance and effort. But the rewards for this level of collaboration are huge. Yet companies continue to ignore this opportunity.

Collaboration in its purest form is a driver of innovation. Great ideas are generated by people. Even greater ideas come from the sharing of ideas. Breakthrough thinking does not happen in isolation. Consider what might be accomplished in your organization if you could get your associates to think and act collaboratively. Such power is not easily achieved and almost impossible

for competitors to emulate. Just imagine the magnitude of results that are available to those who can collaborate internally and externally to their organization. We are talking about innovative improvements in product development, production and operational processes and systems, and leveraging technology to further increase competitiveness. This truly becomes a powerful attribute that will have sustainable competitive advantages over its more traditional rivals.

As described by Robert Porter Lynch, “In a fast-paced, rapidly changing world, the most successful and sustainable source of competitive advantage is through collaborative innovation.”

Since a “lean” transformation is a top-down driven process, it is critical that the collaborative gene reside in the organization’s leadership DNA. Because as the leadership goes, so does the rest of the organization. Therefore, we challenge every organizational leader to explore and adopt for their organization “best practices” in collaboration.

*Coming together is a beginning, keeping together is progress, working together is success.* — Henry Ford 

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