

# Excuses from Naysayers

They say lean and continuous improvement won't work.

Over the years, I have shared stories in this space of finishers who have, through focus on lean and continuous improvement, generated mind-blowing improvements in efficiency. About five years ago I shared the story of how a snow plow coater's paint line increased throughput by over 40 percent through such efforts. Two years later, a power equipment manufacturer achieved a staggering 300 percent throughput improvement the same way. These are just two of dozens of finishers and other organizations that I have had the pleasure of working with toward similar ends.

Nonetheless, there remain the unconvinced who, for one reason or another, believe that a "Lean/Advanced Manufacturing/Continuous Improvement" approach could never work for their business. A number of years ago, I began a list of their excuses and objections. This month, I ponder some of my favorites.

The first group of excuses falls under the theme of "We're Different." In other words, in spite of the fact that many have succeeded in implementing lean tools in organizations as diverse as manufacturing and healthcare and in processes ranging from product manufacturing to back-of-house restaurant operations, the naysayer claims a lean approach will not work for their operation. I have heard nearly every excuse.

"That might work in manufacturing, but we're in health-care," or "Lean might work in Minnesota, but this is Arkansas," or my personal favorite, "That sounds like something you would use in making widgets. Do you see any widgets here? Do you?" No sir, no widgets here.

Others just struggle with change. As the controller for a business I once ran said,

"You're trying to do too much too fast," or as business leader put it, "I promise I'll keep an open mind, but I'm telling you this has no chance of working."

When commencing a business turnaround or lean strategy, I like to imagine how well everything could work if run perfectly. What does ideal efficiency look like? This often brings a series of protests: "We've never been able to run at that level of efficiency, why do you think we could now? We should just budget at two percent improvement and see what happens," or "Paying somebody to track our productivity would be a form of waste."

Another case dealt with a client's proclivity toward offline racking. As it pertains to efficiency, I am generally not a fan of filling racks "offline" because doing so removes the benefit of letting the machine pace the work and often leads to inflated labor costs. When I persistently challenged one business

owner who strongly advocated this practice, he ran out of answers and said, "Offline racking automatically makes our labor more efficient, and if you're not smart enough to understand that I can't help you."

Timing is also used as an excuse for not initiating a lean journey. On the same day that one client explained to me that he was too busy solving quality, direct cost and customer service

problems to focus on lean, another told me that his business was too slow to have to worry about improving efficiency. Another plant manager whose business was slow explained that he encouraged inefficiency so that all of his people could continue working without layoffs.

While some objections fit neatly into categories like "we're different" or "efficiency" or "timing," some are just plain weird, including, "There's our way and the lean way. We do things our way." When I encouraged an operations leader to start his lean journey with a 5S focus he responded, "I guess we could clean this place up, but our people would just make a mess again."

When we asked on customer why he didn't reduce his huge volume of non-conforming coatings rejects sitting in his warehouse, he explained that his customer required he carry a certain number of units in finished goods inventory. Even bad units?

Others in the weird category include "Kaizen is just a bunch of Japanese words that nobody understands," and the mid-level operations person who confided in me that he was only listening to my suggestions because his boss said he had to, and "We figure if we wait it out, eventually you will go away and we can go back to doing things our way."

These are all good, though I admit that my absolute favorite in the weird category was the person who stated, "We do any Kaizen events, but we do drive out waste by focusing on the Seven Deadly Sins." While I suppose any coatings line could benefit from the elimination of pride, envy, wrath, gluttony, lust, sloth and greed, I suspect he meant to say the Seven Deadly Wastes.

While many of these objections are humorous, the unfortunate truth is that leaders that ignore the benefits of a lean, continuous improvement approach do so at their own peril. While they fabricate excuses for why lean won't work in their operations, their competitors are busy proving it will. **PF 80**



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