



THE SHARING GAME

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Sophisticated software programmes have been the main enablers in structured approaches towards sharing corporate know-how. But a true understanding of what exemplifies successful sharing is still lacking.

Shallow copying happens across companies and between plants within multi-site or multi-national organisations. Some of the incidents discussed below took place within global blue-chip organisations where copying was often simple, given the desire for replication and system standardisation in these environments. The risk of blind copying is given added impetus through knowledge management systems such as Microsoft's Sharepoint® (which also is used by CCI).

Real life examples

By applying lean approaches diligently, as well as careful thought and involvement, a visual control technique had been developed for operators at a multi-national giant's minerals processing installation in South America (Site A). This enabled operators and others in the area to visually identify the operating condition of critical equipment for monitoring and managing through standard work, plus a well-designed Daily Management System. This beneficial technique has been expanded across the site...

Site B is an identical operating unit of the same corporation located in another country. After seeing the technique at Site A, Site B managers introduced it at their plant. Tool/technique examples were replicated and implemented on identical equipment. Within a short time though, the flashy new tool had begun to rust through lack of use, and in one application, the colour-coded visual indicator itself had been lost.

Where did it go wrong? Transmission of and sharing specific templates and ideas usually isn't the constraint. The real constraint is the failure to create an environment strongly engaged in driving improvement from a lean perspective, which requires great focus and attention. Once this is in place and thriving, the time is ripe for receiving ideas or solutions seeded from outside the immediate environment.

Some 15 years prior, the same thing happened across departments at a motor industry client. I had assisted in implementing a visual daily management system on the shop floor on one side of the engine assembly line. Results, typical of properly implemented lean approaches, were impressive (a 50% drop in defects per unit in 4 - 6 weeks).

Managers from nearby processes noticed the results and requested assistance to implement this early stage of lean in their departments. Pressed for time, I asked them to wait a few months. The impatient managers then simply copied the engine assembly process. Unfortunately, what works in an assembly environment won't necessarily ensure repeat success with a 'copy and paste' exercise in a machine-intensive continuous batch environment.

One such manager was responsible for the engine block machining line where the machine rather than the people adds product value (common in capital-intensive processes). So, if the machine runs smoothly and no machine-tool breaks occur,

then no defects arise and takt is achieved. However, in an assembly environment, people need to follow detailed standard work practices diligently to achieve the desired result.

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After three weeks of trialling his new visual boards for daily management, the engine block machining manager asked, "Why is there no information on my board, while your engine assembly boards are filled with valuable information by mid-morning?"

Lesson 1: Copying a tool or technique without insight, understanding and deep thinking is highly likely to fail.

Lesson 2: make sure that what you copy is appropriate to your process type (different lean tools are applied to different process types).

Lesson 3: don't blame the channel through which you copied when a tool or lean approach fails, blame yourself.

Reasons for failure

Perfectly good systems, tools or techniques, each with a good fit in a particular lean environment, fail because of these common reasons:

- They were copied by enthusiasts who had insufficient understanding about what it takes to grow a lean environment.
- Tools don't make a lean environment. Lean is primarily a thinking process. It's critical to create a situation which is searching for and developing solutions, before attempting to short-cut this process by copying solutions. But, once this environment is established and developing, borrowing ideas from others must become a key part of the process.
- Understanding your specific value-adding process is an important first step in the lean journey and insights from this will indicate the implementation process, as well as the most appropriate lean tools.
- Beware of substituting systems or tools for thinking - you'll fail.

There's a need to differentiate between 'structural and irreversible' solutions to problems (such as moving a machine) and solutions involving behavioural change. It's easy to imagine that ideas of the former type should be easy enough to copy and their benefits should be long-lasting by definition. This is indeed true. Not so for behavioural changes. These changes are reversible and need to be developed with the people involved. First by recognising the problem, then by accepting the challenge of solving it, doing so and being committed to maintaining the solution and developing supporting systems to achieve this.

A knowledge management system implemented prematurely in a lean journey is likely to implode. And even if the KM system doesn't implode, it may well be the catalyst for your lean journey to fail. Decide on the priority and how to nurture the lean journey. A KM system wrongly implemented or ill-conceived could just be your undoing. But correctly implemented at the right stage of the journey, it could be one of your greatest assets.

NOTE: CCI has enhanced the features of its flagship product DigiTRACC to include a much-improved knowledge sharing ability. Also, we've recently launched an integrated Sharepoint® system operating alongside DigiTRACC to assist clients in sharing and learning. As with the examples discussed, these systems could be misused. Clients should use CCI-developed systems in an informed environment and not as substitutes for the thinking central to the lean journey.



A superb example of Visual Control at Site A used diligently and to good effect, because the environment that created them also uses them. In such environments, transplanting ideas from the outside world well.



The Site A technique copied to Site B. There's nothing wrong with the idea itself, but the environment which should support it isn't in place, hence its collapse.

