

## ARTICLE

# 9 Ways Leaders' Actions Can Sustain Lean Progress

By Michael Serena

## Key Takeaways:

- Many companies eventually lose the momentum they build up during the early years of their lean manufacturing implementations. Sometimes this happens when the champion of a lean initiative moves on and the new manager is not committed to their predecessor's program. In other cases, an acquisition or merger can cause lean projects to take a back seat to other corporate priorities.
- This article reviews the specific behaviors and actions that managers can take to maintain momentum over the long haul. They include constant communication, performance tracking and reporting, motivating employees, going on regular Gemba walks, training programs, and building a kaizen culture.

**Every organization that launches a lean initiative must ultimately find ways to sustain it over time. In many cases, sustaining lean requires a transition from a well-developed kaizen culture at a single site, to a broader enterprise-wide commitment to instill lean into the company's DNA.**

As is too often the case, after the easy gains have been achieved and performance begins to level out, business unit leaders and managers at many companies become disillusioned and turn their attention elsewhere. But this is exactly the time in a business transformation when direct leadership engagement is essential to keep moving forward.

Although there is no sure-fire way to maintain momentum from year to year, there are some specific actions and behaviors that business leaders can take to maintain the vitality of a lean program so that it continues to deliver long-term results. Sustaining a strong lean program beyond the first two or three years requires:

## The Four Phase Recovery Process

This TBM management briefing describes the four-phase crisis recovery process (See Figure 1), that we've developed over the years that can quickly (within three to four months in some circumstances) get a manufacturing plant's performance levels back up to where they should be.

- Widespread communication of current performance and metrics
- Continually finding new ways to keep employees motivated
- Ongoing employee training and learning
- Direct involvement by organization leaders in lean efforts

This article will review some of the practices and the specific actions that business leaders and managers at all levels can take to demonstrate the organization is committed to the lean philosophy, and thereby reap the operational advantages and long-term financial benefits.

## Leadership Behavior and Actions to Sustain Lean

From the CEO to unit leaders to plant managers and supervisors, business leaders at all levels play a critical role in sustaining a lean program. Here are some of the specific tactics, practices, and behaviors that they can deploy to keep employees and teams motivated, and the organization moving forward.

### 1. Communicate the Vision

Company leaders need to provide regular and consistent communication with employees about the specific returns that the company is gaining from its lean initiative, and what's in it for them. Employees need to understand how lean impacts the company's overall competitiveness, financial performance and, ultimately, job security.

### 2. Always Update Standard Work

Standardized work reinforced with visual work instructions based on the kaizen-improved processes can help ensure employees adhere to the correct work procedures. Such standards guard against back-sliding to the old ways of working. Of course leadership must also communicate that standard work processes are always open to modification during future kaizen events.

### 3. Go on Gemba Walks

Going to the gemba, walking around the plant and asking employees, "What did you do this week to make continuous improvement happen?" That's one of the most powerful questions a leader can ask. When business leaders keep asking such questions, employees soon learn what's important and what they need to be working on.

It's important, though, to differentiate between gemba walks and plant walks, or "board" walks. Board walks involve reviewing the plant's performance (SQDC) boards to ensure that each area is meeting targets, and providing support for corrections when needed. A gemba walk typically involves an executive or other top-level manager observing select processes and functions, such as material flow, with the goal of helping plant leaders and other continuous-improvement personnel see potential and high-priority areas for improvement.

### 4. Build a Continuous Improvement Culture

True lean leadership encourages continuous improvement even when the improvement ideas don't meet expectations. By making it acceptable to try something even if it fails, leaders empower workers to assume responsibility for solving their own problems. It's important to demonstrate that observing processes, challenging current practices, and engaging in improvement activities are all part of a comprehensive problem-solving approach that will improve the business.

### 5. Foster a Respectful, Team-Driven Organization

Teamwork is an essential element of any lean initiative because it requires employees from different departments to work together to improve processes that almost always cross functional boundaries. Encouraging groups to contribute their ideas and responding to their suggestions is one way that teamwork demonstrates respect.

Engendering respect and mutual trust is a critical element of any lean initiative. Yet leaders often overlook it because they focus all attention on process improvement. In a lean business, one way to demonstrate such respect is by actively encouraging every employee to be deeply engaged in the work that he or she does for customers and the company.

## 6. Continue to Motivate Employees

Employee enthusiasm for any initiative naturally will wane over time. Full participation in a continuous-improvement program goes far beyond normal job descriptions and the scope of most employee compensation programs.

This is where leaders personally participating in the continuous-improvement process can demonstrate the organization's commitment. They can participate in kaizen events and be part of the problem-solving process. Leaders can motivate individuals by increasing their autonomy and encouraging them to find ways to permanently improve their work.

## 7. Maintain Regular Training

Another way to sustain lean is through non-stop training of all employees, including supervisors, in the redesigned and improved work processes. Cross-training employees is also critical. Employees who have been trained in all the primary work processes tend to exhibit a more proprietary attitude toward improving their own work processes and offering ideas to improve other processes as well.

For instance, Menlo Worldwide Logistics in San Mateo, Calif., a large warehouse and distribution firm, rotates its kaizen teams to examine the work flows in other departments. Groups of employees visit other work areas, inspect the process, and then discuss their ideas and findings to the area's supervisor.

## 8. Reinforce Performance and Progress with Metrics and Visual-Management Tools

Another way to show employees how their efforts are advancing the company's lean efforts is through the use of visual-management tools and constantly updated metrics. Tracking and reporting performance metrics help sustain the organization's commitment to the lean at both the leadership level and on the plant floor.

For example, measuring takt time is one way to ensure employees are following procedures and standard work. Supervisors and work cells should report takt time hourly, and post hour-by-hour charts for employees to see how performance is measuring up against goals. If performance is off, the team can see it and figure out what needs to be done to get back on track.



At the FedEx Express Aircraft Maintenance facility at Los Angeles International Airport, the plant's managing director takes employees bowling, assigning them to teams that compete with each other to get the highest score within a defined set of parameters. Employees quickly figure out that they must collaborate to get the highest team score. After the bowling session the plant's managing director holds a lean training session to reinforce how teamwork improves outcomes.

## 9. Post Continuous-Improvement Scorecards

Tracking progress on a month-to-month basis reinforces accountability and gives leadership an opportunity to check on results. At Menlo Worldwide, for example, each warehouse is evaluated based on projects completed that month and planned projects in the coming month. Each facility posts a monthly “continuous-improvement roadmap,” known within Menlo as a “30-30” form. The April/May 30-30 may contain a half-dozen or more initiatives completed in April, along with a similar number of projects scheduled for May. These forms report project status and detail the time trimmed from each process and the annual savings.

Whether it’s a week-long kaizen event or a six-month project, too many companies make improvements that produce significant early results, and then they walk away to work on the next thing. To use a medical metaphor, just because the operation is a success doesn’t mean the treatment is complete. The doctor still needs to monitor the patient through a post-operative recovery and follow up with physical therapy.

Long-term success with lean works much the same way. Business improvement leaders need to follow up to make sure new behavior patterns are consistent with the new methodology. This includes a commitment by executives to remain engaged in the lean process by going to the gemba and participating in kaizen events.

## The Bottom Line

Management behavior and actions are part of a successful company’s overall effort to regularly communicate the impact lean has on financial targets and how the employees’ contributions impact them.

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## Meet the Expert



**Michael Serena**

Vice President  
TBM Consulting Group

✉ [mserena@tbmcg.com](mailto:mserena@tbmcg.com)

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TBM specializes in operations and supply chain consulting for manufacturers and distributors. We accelerate operational performance to make you more agile and help you accelerate business performance 3–5x faster than your peers.

