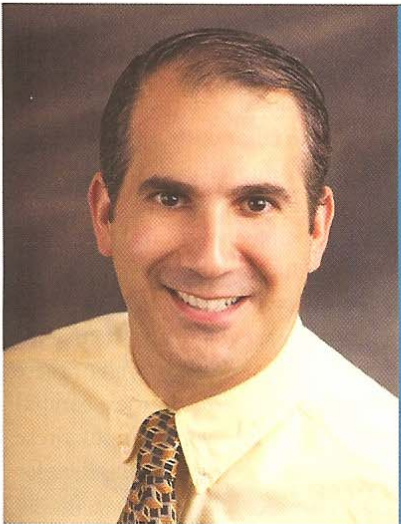


Going lean? Listening to your customers should come first



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THE JOB LOSSES AT FACILITIES THROUGHOUT Wisconsin including Fisher Hamilton, Bemis-owned Milprint Inc., First Health Group, and AT&T, to name a few, hold several important lessons for organizations throughout the state. I believe one of these lessons relates to lean manufacturing and listening to customers.

Lean manufacturing has clearly defined goals for short cycle times, high quality and rapid project development. More than 50 years ago, Japanese auto manufacturer Toyota began developing this continuous improvement methodology that combines a deep understanding of quality with a desire to be the fastest. Think of lean manufacturing as a buzz phrase or internal term. What's really important is satisfying the customer by providing high-quality goods in a short period of time at a competitive investment.

Locally, Belmark in De Pere, Brillion-based Ariens, and Milwaukee-based Gardner Bender implemented continuous improvement in their organizations several years ago, which has placed them on the path to success. Yet I've observed a troubling

trend over the past few years as some companies jump on the "lean bandwagon," searching for a quick fix to improve efficiency, without putting a process in place to build and measure customer needs and complete satisfaction. In fact, several companies I've spoken with recently have missed this vital step of asking and listening to their customers prior to implementing lean. In addition, lean objectives are not clearly identified and it seems companies have not done their homework.

For good reason, organizations are eagerly pursuing lean, but they need to be sure that a customer-needs analysis is part of the equation. As with other customer-focused strategies and initiatives, lean must follow the same concepts of ask, listen and learn from its customers. I call this "Voice of the Customer," a proactive process that identifies, measures, communicates and implements what the customer really wants. To me, this is the true cornerstone of lean manufacturing.

Lean can be a costly undertaking given the amount of employee and consulting time required. To increase the chances for success and move the needle where it counts — with customers — organizations considering lean also should partner with a firm specializing in Voice of the Customer. This ensures that the effort is customer driven, and not simply a way for companies to produce more widgets.

Used with lean, Voice of the Customer provides a venue to build stronger customer partnerships and validate improving the "right" processes. Lean's purpose is continuous improvement. As feedback is received from customers to improve the processes they deem critical, companies should collaborate with their customers' lean team to implement process improvements to create a fully systematic lean process. Taken to its highest level, lean and Voice of the Customer provide a means for firms and customers to conduct joint improvement activities.

One of our clients was focused on improving its delivery time process — already a competitive advantage. When speaking with their top customers, the feedback we received was that delivery time was fine and didn't require improvements. Instead, customers wanted this client to improve its sales decision-making process. From this feedback, our client improved efficiency and increased responsiveness, but not on the delivery end that was initially the priority.

Listening to the voice of your customer involves learning what they want, knowing what they are willing to pay, and understanding what actions your customers believe add value to your products or services. The only way to know these things for sure is to conduct qualitative and quantitative research that will ultimately help you build stronger customer partnerships while improving production and reducing waste wherever possible.

Done properly, the rewards of lean are usually worth the investment. But before you go lean, be sure to understand your customers' needs, as they are highly unpredictable and ever-changing. Otherwise, how will you know which critical processes to improve? ■

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