

# Leaders' Actions Speak but Their Talk Matters in a Lean/CI Culture

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Many organizations are investing in lean continuous improvement programs, systems and staff. The aim for most is to transform to a culture where employees are engaged in problem solving at the work flow level. Frequently there are critical pieces missing in these initiatives, however. One key piece is defining a new role for managers asked to lead in a continuous improvement culture. Another is helping managers develop the skills and habits needed to be effective leaders in the new environment

The traditional ideas about the role of managers are based on assumptions about their position, function and experience. The traditional manager is expected to have more key business information and insight into the workings of the organization and operations than her or his employees. That leads to the related expectation that the manager is in the best position to solve problems, decide improvements and drive results. It is also the basis for the assumption that managers should tell employees what to think, direct their activities and coach by feedback and correction.

Such assumptions and behaviors were more effective when operations were simpler, change was less frequent and there was less information to be processed and managed. They do not work as well when the aim is to engage employees in sharing what they know about problems and using what they know to think of and execute solutions and improvements.

Employees have to believe they are safe in pointing out problems, allowed to offer their ideas for solutions and improvements, and respected as capable of the thinking required for problem solving responsibility. The dilemma is that the behaviors of traditional managers do not communicate any of these beliefs or help create the kind of environment that invites or supports employee responsibility or initiative.

Most lean/CI programs do not offer managers and leaders help in recognizing that the ways they have always been rewarded for thinking and acting do not serve the new business priority of employee engagement in problem solving responsibility. And managers are seldom supported in changing to more supportive and effective behaviors. For example, manager standard work programs often focus on getting leaders to go to the worksite but don't describe how they should act and talk when they get there.

Many of the underlying assumptions about management in the traditional model lead to leader attitudes and behaviors that are barriers to engaging employees. The challenges managers face in making the transition from traditional managers to continuous improvement leaders are many and huge. It is essential to bring those challenges into the open and lead our organizations in finding ways to address them if we are to achieve the lean/continuous improvement culture we aspire to.

It is not just of a matter of telling managers that many of our current ways of talking to employees are having an unintended impact on the aim of engaging employees. Our habits as knowers and fixers are deeply ingrained in us and in our culture as a whole. But there are small but effective changes managers and leaders can make in the way they relate to employees when taking about

problems that will make a big difference. As a starting point I believe if leaders experiment with these five new behaviors the impact on engagement will be remarkable:

- Asking questions they don't think they already know the answer to
- Listening to the person not just the problem
- Acknowledging they heard and what they heard (nothing does more to show respect)
- Asking questions focused on things they wonder about, not about what they are thinking
- Ask what helps is needed or wanted

Hopefully when line managers and senior leaders see a difference in employee openness and energy, they will be “pulled” to work on developing these behaviors into habits that become automatic when talking to employees about issues in the work. Any or all of the behaviors can contribute to creating a management environment in which employees feel safe and confident in sharing what they know and stepping up as self-initiating problem solvers. Ask your leaders to experiment with the new behaviors along with you.