

# BREAKTHROUGH

Lean Implementation & Training Resource Publication  
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## THE AVALANCHE

By Michael Lewis

### Questions: Initiate the Exchange

You are thinking that you have enough to do without asking operators if they have a problem or a solution to a problem. You know that can be like asking someone to throw you a lit stick of dynamite to go with the rattlesnake, the chainsaw, and the annual budget you are already juggling.

Asking those questions in the past may have resulted in your resolving, "Boy that was stupid; I bet I'll never do that again." Because of such experiences, asking operators for solutions is not part of most Lean implementations. We don't know what they are going to say, or throw at us! Additionally, meetings, plans, timelines – weeks or months of preparation leading up to an implementation - have all been developed independently of operator input. It is a great plan; we all agreed on it in the meeting. Or is it?

### Missing Involvement

No one knows the process better than the operator doing it. From the accounting department to the assembly line this is true. What business does not have a measurable difference between what is supposed to be happening and what is actually being done? I believe we call it 'variation,' and those pesky little humans are doing it.

The engineering instruction and the process application of the instruction somehow just don't ever seem to meet. Yet those operators, supervisors and team leaders – who often get the blame for not doing what they are supposed to be doing – are spending huge volumes of time and energy keeping an often broken system running.

They haven't been given a control plan, training, or engineered tools. They are innovating spot corrections to production and quality issues daily. They are highly engaged in the minute-to-minute operation of the business. They come to work fully charged, prepared to overcome obstacles. 'Innovative, energized, and engaged' sounds like the profile of someone we want on our implementation team!

Two things that are often missing from Lean events are the absence of operator involvement from the beginning, and a way to manage the avalanche when you ask for their input. To get operator involvement prior to beginning an implementation, large or small, key stake holders should be identified in all departments – at all levels and on all shifts. Each of them should be represented in meetings, if possible, or be provided a communication venue throughout the planning process.

Then, to solve the problem of the avalanche, there needs to be a pre-planned response system to: 1). Collect issues, 2). Direct resources, and 3). Assign a priority to the answers and additional questions presented by those extremely knowledgeable operators. Care should be taken to design a response system that is focused on solving systemic problems, and on fixing single occurrences. A problem-tracking board is a simple tool that will accomplish this task.

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### Keeping It Simple

Computer-based systems that limit the ability of operators to provide input should be avoided. Keep it simple – flip charts, white boards, and markers. The tracking board should create an urgency to resolve problems as they are listed, not create a database of open issues. Column headings might include:

- |                        |   |
|------------------------|---|
| 1. Problem:            | 5. Assigned to:                                   |
| 2. Recommend Solution: | 6. Short Term Countermeasure Implementation Date: |
| 3. Recorded by:        | 7. Permanent Countermeasure Implementation Date:  |
| 4. Recorded date:      | 8. Status (open / closed):                        |

Items that can be corrected quickly – such as providing a tool, or clarifying a work instruction – should be implemented immediately. A larger systemic problem should be included with the quick-fix problems where applicable. For example, a missing work instruction could be corrected immediately; the systemic issue is how many other work instructions are missing? Is there a systemic problem, and what is the solution for it?

If possible, providing the person recording the problem with the tools necessary for making the correction, will involve many other people in fixing the problem as soon as it is highlighted. Items needing additional support – such as design changes, or capital purchases – should be assigned to a lead person. And a date to update the status of the item on a separate long-term tracking-board could be assigned. Keep asking, “Did we fix the symptom, or did we fix the problem?”

Sustaining Lean initiatives and improvements will depend on encouraging operator input, fixing the systemic problems, and maintaining a standardized communication venue for issue identification and prioritization. The ingredient guaranteed to get results that you want to add to your next implementation should be a question. 2/2

### GUARANTEED RESULTS



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**Stay tuned!**

This is part 2 of 4 of the Lean Implementation Principles series. Look for the next article in the series as we move into the New Year!