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Combining SF with Lean Thinking – What Works Well About It?

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Abstract

In recent years, the practice of Lean Thinking has expanded significantly. Businesses of all sizes, governments (both at the national and local levels) and most public services across the globe have attempted to implement it to drive cost savings and greater efficiency. In this article I will explore what Lean Thinking is, what the potential links with SF practice and principles are and the benefit of combining the two. I will also provide an example from my own experience.

First, What is Lean Thinking?

When we refer to operational processes in an organisation as ‘lean,’ we mean that all the resources used in them help deliver value to the end customers and nothing else. This value has to ‘flow’ through the different steps in the value chain without any interruption. All activities that are not directly supporting uninterrupted creation and delivery of value should be considered as waste and therefore reviewed for potential elimination. In other words, Lean is focused on getting the right things in the right quantity to the right place at the right time, while achieving perfect work flow. The pace of the flow is dictated by customers’ ‘pull’ of the goods or services. All of this has to be done while staying flexible and able to respond to change. Lean originated in and focused on the manufacturing floor and the supply chain. Over the past

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ten years or so, Lean has expanded to services and internal support processes in organisations, and we can now see Lean implementation in hospitals, call centres and banks amongst many other service organisations.

Lean has a set of principles which emphasise the importance of value to the customer/user, flow and continuous improvement. Different Lean practitioners put a different emphasis on flow versus value.

Some commonly used Lean tools and techniques include: 5S (five workplace optimisation practices that begin with the letter S), Kaizen (loosely translated as ‘continuously improve’ or ‘change for better’), Kanban, Seven Wastes, Value-stream Mapping and Takt Time. There are many other useful tools in the Lean tool box. All of these tools were developed to bring to life the different Lean principles. Many of them originated from Toyota, which created a framework for continuous improvement known as the Toyota Production System (or TPS). These tools are covered in detail in many Lean theory and practice books. It is important to note that many of these improvement tools, while very useful in general, were developed in a specific time and a given context which may challenge one of the SF principles. (‘Every case is different.’)

One value of the Toyota Production System which it is particularly important to mention in our context is ‘respect for people.’ This normally comes down to: respecting all stakeholders, building trust and placing a special emphasis on teamwork.

Although Lean is often portrayed as a collection of tools to manage and improve processes, it is firstly and mostly a whole-system management philosophy, and therefore the adoption of Lean in an organisation stipulates a significant culture change at all levels. Such a complete culture change is what separates truly successful Lean organisations from others who have tried to run ‘Lean initiatives’ with more local focus (even if these initiatives were proven to be very successful).

SF and Lean – A Match Made in Heaven?!?

The first strength-based approach to change I was introduced to was Appreciative Inquiry (AI). A couple of years later I was introduced to SF as an alternative strength-based approach to working with change. While the links between AI and Lean seemed elusive to begin with (over time I was able to find ways forward but that is a whole other story), SF seemed to fit with Lean practice very easily and add another interesting ‘flavour’ to the pursuit of efficiency.

The first connection I was able to see straight away was Lean Thinking’s emphasis on continuous improvement, which seemed to align well with taking ‘small steps’ towards a ‘future perfect.’

The key benefits I have experienced by using SF together with Lean usually fall into three categories:

1. Ensuring continuity of the best from the past;
2. Finding new resources and innovating new ideas;
3. Easier transition to an improved future and sustained improvement.

The SF principle of ‘find what works and do more of it’ is an important reminder in process improvement efforts using Lean. Often the focus on changing what doesn’t work in the classic approach results in loss of existing, useful tacit knowledge and good practices.

Common Lean practice engages people in identifying waste in processes and understanding its root causes. A positive shift in the conversation and a ‘growth’ mindset can be achieved by focusing our analytical efforts (using precisely the same Lean tools) on the identification of existing positive ‘exceptions’ of excellent performance instead. Understanding the root causes of value-creation is also an important factor in this positive shift. The emphasis moves away from ‘what went wrong and why’ to ‘where or when does this process/employee perform well/at its best and what enables it?’ This expands our awareness and allows more creativity from all involved. It creates a completely different level of engagement.

Finally, transition to an improved future can be made a lot easier by using simple SF tools such as ‘scale’ and ‘small steps’ and sustainability of the improvements can be strengthened by continuously identifying ‘resources’ and ‘exceptions’.

From my experience, many Lean practitioners who are first introduced to SF may claim that the SF approach ignores the existing problems in processes – the exact same problems they set themselves to solve. It is important to emphasise to them that using SF together with Lean does not ignore problems or waste. It only makes the road to improvement a lot easier and quicker. In order to overcome the failures and wastes, it is far better to learn where we create success and value. Once operators, their managers and those leading improvement efforts understand what enables success, they are better placed to help recreate and build on it, assisting sustainability and longer-term improvement. Understanding root causes of failure or wastes only gets us as far as speculating about what might solve the problem, and then trying that with varying degrees of success. These speculations typically come from other areas of the operation or ‘best practice’ from elsewhere, instead of tapping into the internal tacit knowledge that undoubtedly exists in the system.

The Lean coach – a sweet spot for SF

A great potential ‘sweet spot’ for SF exists with those who are trained to take the role of Lean coaches (or *sensei* in Japanese). Lean coaches are trained to observe, interact and train process operators in a way that helps raise solutions to existing problems while maintaining ‘respect for people.’ In my view many Lean coaches can benefit from adding SF tools, thinking and interaction to their existing knowledge of Lean tools, principles and practice. It can make their interactions more positive, engaging, confidence-building and impactful.

A Few Ways Forward – SF Tools, Practices and Principles to Consider

The following points highlight the key tools, practices and principles from SF most relevant to the practice of Lean Thinking, in my view and experience:

- 1. Creating a platform for Lean change.** In most Lean projects or initiatives, the need for change or improvement starts with a leader or a process owner identifying that the processes in their area are ‘broken’ or ‘wasteful.’ The fact that a leadership team, a process owner, an influential stakeholder or even the end customer thinks that a process is ‘broken’ or inefficient and therefore needs to be improved is only a starting point. What do others who touch the process think? Do they agree? Are they willing to do something about it? Clarifying and enhancing the level of interest in a Lean-driven change by creating a ‘platform for change’ can be a great starting point in any Lean improvement journey. This will involve engaging everyone around a shared definition of what is actually wanted, what the situation will be with the problem solved and what the benefit is of getting there.
- 2. Find what works (in the current context) and do more of it.** As SF practitioners know, every situation is different, no matter how similar it may seem to other situations we have faced before, a story we read about or a problem that was solved in another organisation. Lean practitioners, however, often have ‘favourite tools’ – tools that have worked well in previous situations, are well documented in books or hailed by ‘experts’. Finding what works means they have to focus their attention elsewhere: to look for and inquire into what works in the situation in front of them. If they (or someone else external to a process) ‘know’ what should work, then they will undoubtedly try to find supporting evidence, and therefore miss important clues to what really works. Not knowing what should be done and

staying curious about finding clues is the easiest approach to seeing the way forward more clearly. Many of the SF tools are useful in the search for what is working and for finding ways to do more of it (for example, ‘future perfect’, ‘counters’ and ‘affirmations’ are useful in finding what works; ‘scaling’ and ‘small steps’ help uncover ways to do more of it).

3. **‘Make things as simple as possible, but no simpler.’**

(Albert Einstein) The practice of SF highlights the value of simplicity in many ways:

- *Using simple language* – describing ideas, situations and the way forward using ‘\$5 words instead of \$5,000 words’ – is helpful to successful change. (I chuckle as I think of the frequent use of Japanese words in Lean Thinking – clearly they are only ‘simple’ to those who are fluent in Japanese.)
- *Making use of what is available instead of focusing on what isn’t.* Anything that seems to be connected with things working, going better, or even going less badly than normal, is worth exploring. This includes personal strengths, positive qualities, useful experiences, skills and co-operation as well as examples of the ‘solution’ occurring already.
- *Finding and taking the smallest, simplest step forward* can be a great way to shift the situation and start a movement towards a better future. Small steps also offer fresh clues about what works. Improvement doesn’t always require a complex project and months of analysis and planning.

SF and Process Improvement – A Case Story

The following case story highlights the value of asking a few SF questions to generate fresh insights and the energy to implement them. The fact that the SF experience followed an evaluation of the business process from a deficit point of view further emphasises the impact SF offers for process improvement.

The story

The client, a multinational with offices across Europe, was interested in improving the order-management process across several countries. Order management included all the activities taking place from the moment a customer ordered a product through to delivery, including invoicing, payment and service evaluation.

To start with, we agreed to visit the markets and conduct an evaluation of the current state of the process in order to identify the needs, current issues and potential future improvements in each market. For that purpose, we created a list of standard evaluation questions.

We started the first evaluation in Spain by getting an overview of the market and its unique challenges, provided by the local team. We then went through our pre-defined evaluation questions. The next step was mapping the relevant processes and issues. This step took most of the day. At the end of the day, and as part of the standard questionnaire we had prepared, we asked the team what they thought we should focus on, and which improvements they would like to see in the process. We were surprised to hear their answers:

‘We’re already working on a couple of projects that would solve all our problems.’

‘We do not really need any help from you.’

‘Perhaps other markets could use your help better.’

‘We’re already implementing some of the ideas we shared with you.’

The work day was nearing its end, and it has been quite an exhausting exercise, so we concluded the evaluation at that stage. Both my colleague and I were disappointed by the final answers we had received and the apparent lack of engagement or appetite for our help.

The next day, I suggested meeting again with some members of the local team to ask a few SF questions. Sitting with two local team members, I thanked them for everything they shared with us previously and explained that I had a few more questions. I told them that these additional questions

were ‘slightly different than the ones they had been asked before.’ I did not elaborate. Due to the lack of interest at the end of the previous day, I felt that establishing a ‘platform for change’ would be beneficial. I therefore posed the following question:

If, by some magic, you could have an additional day every week (i.e. a sixth working day out of a week of eight days – so not at the expense of your weekend) to be dedicated for process improvements only, what would you do with all that extra time? What would make the extra time worthwhile for you?

Immediately, I noticed a change in body language. Almost instantly, they became more relaxed and even smiled at me. It was clear they enjoyed being asked a ‘different’ question.

What followed was a very detailed response for over fifteen minutes, helped by me occasionally asking ‘what else?’ The responses were rich in substance and language, raising new ideas for improvements they wanted to see and were prepared to pursue. These ideas ranged from relatively simple ones (e.g. finding a better way to sort paper work), all the way to negotiating and implementing improved delivery service.

I added a second question:

If I was part of the top management sitting at the head office, what would make it worthwhile for me and the company to create this extra day for you?

In response to the second question, they were able to justify the investment of time and resources by the impact it would have on employee morale, capabilities and quality of service.

I was also positively surprised by the answer they gave to a scaling question – ‘on a scale from 1–10, where 10 is the detailed view of the possible future, where are you now?’ It ranged from 6 to 7.5 out of 10. They finally agreed it was 6.5! I was genuinely surprised by the high rating they gave, especially following the experiences from the day before. I mentioned it to them, saying ‘Wow, so many good things are already in place, can you tell me more about what’s making it 6.5 and not lower?’ Their response again was very detailed and rich. They felt confident that the next step of improvement

would easily bring them to a rating of 8 or 9, and they were very clear about how they would get there. I asked a final ‘resource’ question: ‘Can you give me examples of when the order-management process worked really well?’ Again, it was answered very enthusiastically.

At the end of our conversation, both the local team members and I were excited. They felt confident about their current capabilities and commented positively on the ‘different questions’ I used. They were pleased with the new ideas that had emerged, and eager to take action. Coming out of the room, I shared my experience with my colleague, who had not been in the room during the conversation. She was positively surprised with the outcome and asked me to integrate these ‘new’ questions in the market evaluation that followed!

We had a similar experience in Italy, where fresh insights emerged. In addition, members of the team kept a high level of engagement with us after we left their offices and continued to ask for our support with several improvement ideas. This was particularly encouraging, considering the obvious lack of interest in our improvement initiative at the end of the first day.

Summary

While there are many more ways to combine SF and Lean than I can cover in a single article (a book is more of the order . . .) I hope you can now see how Lean Thinking and SF are complementary: there are benefits in combining them. SF helps Lean in the following ways:

- It helps create momentum for change.

- It drives wider and deeper engagement as well as more acceptance.

- It taps into existing strengths and knowledge that often remain hidden.

- An SF approach to Lean can help create a sustained culture of continuous improvement.

- Most important, SF tools can easily be integrated into process improvement through Lean Thinking. What is chal-

lenging is not the tools: it's the mind-set and where we choose to place our attention.

References

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