

Appreciative & Strengths-based Lean Thinking

Positive Engagement with Business Improvement and Efficiency

Edited by

David Shaked and Nicolas Stampf

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Appreciative & Strengths-based Lean Thinking: Positive Engagement with Business Improvement and Efficiency

Inside this issue

Welcome to November 2015 issue of AI Practitioner

This issue details what makes process improvement engaging and resourceful, and creates something new that is better and more powerful than simply adding the two fields together.

In "Sustainable OD as an Issue Centric Approach", Danielle P. Zandee sets out four premises of sustainable OD.

In Research Review & Notes, Jannie Pretorius from South Africa shows how

studying the positive core of exceptional individuals has been applied in higher education, while AI Resources focuses on ways AI can help evolve the use of Lean Thinking in businesses and organisations.

From 2016, *AI Practitioner* will be published by the Instituut voor Interventiekunde (Institute for Intervention Studies, www.instituutvoorinterventiekunde.nl) in Amsterdam, a school of Appreciative

Interventionism and place to become an AI practitioner, master practitioner or meta practitioner. Founded by Wick van der Vaart, it has many ideas for developing *AI Practitioner* and I wish them all success. Very many thanks to everyone who helped me develop a simple email newsletter into the current international journal.

Anne Radford
Editor, *AI Practitioner*

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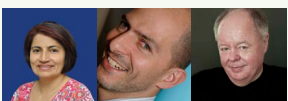


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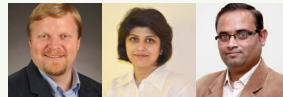


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David Shaked

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Interview with an Operations Director

Accelerated Business Improvement through Strengths-based Lean Six Sigma

Lyle & Scott is a British life-style/fashion brand with a rich heritage of 140 years. After a revival in the 1980s, it reached its best ever results a few years ago. The UK market drives the biggest part of the business, with Sweden being another significant export market. Its mission is to secure the foundations of the business and to continue to grow: steps are being taken to identifying potential new markets and global expansion.

Lorna Stelakis is the Operations Director at Lyle & Scott (L&S). Her role covers the complete product planning and order management cycles of all clothing seasons and ranges. Some clothing lines are produced in-house while the majority is sourced from outside suppliers. Lorna started at the early age of 17 in product merchandising. She has followed a typical career path in this field, from a buyer's assistant to a merchandiser role. She initially joined L&S ten years ago as a consultant to help create a "critical-path" management and introduce stock planning and merchandising functions.

Between 2012 and 2015, I supported Lorna as an external consultant on several projects including advising the internal continuous improvement project team she headed, facilitating process improvement workshops, Lean strategy thinking, and introducing Appreciative Inquiry (AI) and coaching.

The interview

David: I am particularly excited to interview you today because you have had the experience of using Lean Six Sigma both from the classic approach which is more deficit- and problem-orientated and also the strengths-based approach. Before we talk about Strengths-based Lean, can you tell me how did you start your journey with Lean Six Sigma?

Lorna: Our business owner, Sue, told me one day that Dartex [another business owned by her] is running a two-day Lean Six Sigma training and that she'd like me to come to it because I am so process-orientated. At that point I was only responsible for the merchandising part of the business. She wanted me to see if it is something we could apply to L&S. I joined the training and thought it was absolutely fascinating stuff. But I didn't think that we could apply it to L&S as-is. We started talking about having a

'You could see instantly people's strengths, who would listen, who are the people who just talk, who are the people who get on and do things...'

Lorna

continuous improvement project to introduce Lean into the business. It went down an avenue that I wasn't enjoying at all because it was about trying to improve the business from a mathematical point of view. It was just a frustration. I could tell after the first few months that it wasn't going to go anywhere.

We also had another consultant at the time. It was just a really bad experience. Then Sue went on your [AI Foundations] course and suggested I met you. My gut told me we needed to do something but not in the formulaic way that you would traditionally do Lean Six Sigma. It was more about improving processes in a positive way that would interest people because thinking about processes isn't interesting to them. Particularly when you're in a creative business like L&S – it's really difficult to engage a designer in a process workshop!

The positive core of classic Lean and transitioning to Strengths-based Lean

David: You said earlier that you found the first two-day training fascinating. What was fascinating in it for you?

Lorna: It was probably the experience of being in a room full of people who were trying to solve a problem and experiencing it in a production and process-orientated business such as Dartex. It was almost like having a helicopter view, watching how the business was running and how staff and managers operate in it. The Lean game¹ was definitely the highlight for me because it just explained what team work is about and how refining your processes so that you're doing things in a logical order means you're not going round in circles. I've used the game recently as part of our management development programme for potential managers. It was fantastic. We had a really good fun with it. They thought it was the highlight of their two-day induction. You could just see instantly people's strengths, who would listen, who are the people who just talk, who are the people who get on and do things – a good people-watching experience – seeing how they behave under stress.

David: So you had some experience-based learning over a couple of days in the original training and you brought back some of these games and ideas to L&S. You also had a go at trying the analysis approach with the other consultant. Mathematical kind of analysis and that didn't quite work...

Lorna: No it didn't work. The consultant didn't fit the culture at all and he wasn't listening so we went down a route which I suppose was problem-based. It was looking for all the things that were wrong and all it was doing was analysing and analysing and analysing and not even really looking for solutions, just looking to demonstrate what was wrong. It wasn't really helping. It felt like we could be doing this for the next year and all we're going to do is confirm what we know already from gut feel about what is wrong with the business.

¹ Lean simulation. Different versions of it are used in most Lean training programmes to give participants the sense of rapid process improvement. It starts with a process that is intentionally inefficient. Participants are then grouped to execute the process as-is (to notice what is inefficient). They then start improving it in subsequent runs. A video clip of a popular version of the game can be found at <http://www.leansimulations.org/2011/02/lean-lego-game-4-rounds-to-successful.html>.

'It felt like we could be doing this for the next year and all we're going to do is confirm what we know already from gut feel about what is wrong with the business.'

Lorna

'I ended up with a feeling of excitement about what I could do to make things better as opposed to feeling there is so much that needs to improve, where do I start?'

Lorna

Gaining a confident voice to change the flow of the business

David: What did you want to have happen instead?

Lorna: [laughs] I wanted everything to be the best it could ever be. I don't know if that's what I wanted at the time or whether this came later through AI, but that's all I can remember. I knew that it could be better. My nature has always been to find ways to do things better and quicker and be able to relax or do something else. I guess that what I was looking for was a vehicle to... Oh yes, a vehicle to be able to have a confident voice so that we can change the flow of the business.

David: So let's go back to our first meeting... was there anything that I said or mentioned that got your attention and got you to think that Strengths-based Lean is a better way to approach improvement than the classic way...

Lorna: I ended up with a feeling of excitement about what I could do to make things better as opposed to feeling there is so much that needs to improve, where do I start? It's just a totally different feeling. I can't even remember what was the first discussion we had, can you? I suppose it felt like a completely different approach that would side-step the need for trawling through the negatives. Because trawling through the negatives day-in-day-out is such an awful place to be. And then having to tell other people what's not working is even worse.

Focus on what you're looking for

For example, just using the question – if this would be the best that it could be, what it would look like... I use that every day now. I use it all the time. I just felt after our first couple of conversations that this was... perhaps a difficult concept to sell to people because it is gentle and it feels like it could be slower but actually when you get people on side it's a lot faster. Much much faster... because you get to the end point right at the start. You focus on what you're looking for instead of focusing on what you need to fix.

David: Of all the different experiences you and I had together with Strengths-based Lean – think about one specific experience you had that, when you came out of it, you said to yourself, "Wow, that was a great experience of Lean from a strengths-based point of view..."

Lorna: There was the day you and I did the appreciative thinking about L&S, trying to understand what we actually do as a whole system. When I came up with the overall flow for the business – "Design it", "Make it", "Sell it" etc., that was brilliant. I have used that one more than anything else we did. I asked HR to include it with every induction even if it means I have to do it! That was a huge step forward putting it out in such simple version, showing people how things work.

You focus on what you're looking for instead of focusing on what you need to fix.

Lorna

'It had really surprising positive outcomes.'

Lorna

I'm also thinking of one of the workshops. Maybe the order entry process or "on time and in full delivery" when we first started using the strengths-based spider chart.²

What's great, and how do we get there?

David: What about it?

Lorna: It was a good Strengths-based Lean workshop. We had all the team together and people didn't get on with each other, all blaming each other for doing the wrong thing. Getting them all to think what would "great" look like for the different parts of the process – that's what transformed the situation. Because it demonstrated that everyone was on the same page. Everyone agreed what "great" looked like.

And it had really surprising positive outcomes. The appreciative approach took away the "it's your fault" part of it and that really surprised me because that's the bit that I was most nervous about in these workshops. What AI brought to Lean is, people still had confrontations but they were not confrontational if that makes sense. It meant that we could have the conversations that were frustrating people and it didn't end up in a competition of who was right and who was wrong because we started with "What's great?" and "How do we get there?" and we didn't focus on "These are the bits that are bad".

Resistance? What resistance?

David: So you've looked at what was already working and what would "great" really look like and the tougher conversations about "what needs to change" were...

Lorna: People just didn't feel defensive about it because we started with "Tell me about something that you can see is working well". It got everyone in such a positive frame of mind that they were not defensive, and then they're more open to suggestions about how things could be improved. It was also good to have participants raise their own suggestions when we asked "What would you like to implement in your area?"

We also had all the people in the room. Initially it felt like "Oh my god why are we having all these people in the room to solve this problem" but it means that you solve it completely. You don't just solve a bit of it in a way that works for a small group. Everyone was looking at ways to make each other's job easier. We couldn't do that without having everyone involved. It seems a contradiction to Lean to have many people involved but it means you can make things Leaner because you're finding ways to improve your area and seeing how they fit with others and who could help you achieve that easier, faster, more efficient.

Combining Lean and AI – the value of Strengths-based Lean

We still use it regularly. This morning I used it because we were having issues with the finance team not paying suppliers on time. So we looked at: which suppliers are we

² A spider chart, also known as a radar chart, plots the values of each category along a separate axis that starts in the centre of the chart and ends on the outer ring.

'Even really negative people came out of the day saying "That was fantastic."'

Lorna

paying on time? What could we learn from that or how do we get our customers to pay us on time? Which bits of that process are working– could we apply them to paying money? It's the combination of Lean and AI. I don't think you can do it with just one approach. I don't think I can do one without the other now because they so completely fit well together.

David: So, moving on, based on what you've experienced and seen, what do you see as the strengths of a strengths-based approach to Lean?

Lorna: Probably my overriding word would be: *people*. Because of the effect it has on people in making them not defensive. When you do Lean from a problem-based angle it automatically makes people defensive about what they're doing and maybe not as honest about what is going wrong. Whereas when you do it from a strengths-based approach it just has such a different emotional effect on everybody.

You can feel the difference in the room. In the earlier workshops we did there was this "Why do I have to stay in the room the whole day to talk about this crap" and "Oh there are all these people in the room that I don't get on with". You can guarantee that a couple of hours in, it's totally transformed and people are contributing and speaking and they feel much more able to talk about what is wrong because you're approaching it from a "What's right?" angle. It's just a completely different feeling. Even really negative people came out of the day saying "That was fantastic. I thought it was going to be a waste of time but it's the best I've had in L&S in ages. Can we do this on other processes too?" So that would be my number one – it makes people contribute more effectively because they don't feel threatened or criticised.

David: OK. If you can, in a sentence or two, how would you describe Strengths-based Lean?

Lorna: For me, it's a method for continuous improvement – constantly focusing on what you can achieve as opposed to what's wrong. Strengths-based Lean is a really efficient, positive way of constantly making things better and constantly striving to be the best that you can be in a way that almost ensures that it gets better. It just can't fail. Can it? I can't see how it can ever fail.

Looking to the future

David: So, let's look into the future – what else would you love to do with Strengths-based Lean?

Lorna: If I could absolutely dream the impossible dream ... I'd love to have a brand where everyone has that strengths-based mentality: having everyone buying into it would make this place a great place to work and a place where everyone can be the best person that they can be – at work and outside because it always rubs off outside work.

'I'd love to have a brand where everyone has that strengths-based mentality.'

Lorna

'It's helped me focus less on the obstacles and more on the end goal.'

Lorna

David: What do you see for Strengths-based Lean beyond L&S? What are your hopes for this way of working?

Lorna: It feels to me like something that could change the world. I know it sounds mad. I think people's natural inclination is to look at problems and how to solve them, whereas when you focus on how you want something to be you're far more likely to get it. I think that there are so many things around the world that could be improved if we can get people to think this way. Oh that's a bit big, isn't it? I just can see it working everywhere.

Just look at what we've achieved in our little company where some characters had their backs against the wall because they feared for their jobs. Yet we got them to come together and agree a solution that they would have never done otherwise. We would never have got to that position without the Strengths-based Lean way of doing it. It's just such a different feeling about doing stuff. It makes you feel like you can achieve things. I am a realist ... and strengths-based!

David: A final question. Is there anything else you wanted to say about Strengths-based Lean that you haven't said or perhaps you did but you want to say again?

Lorna: I guess it's been an amazing thing personally for me. I'm not a pessimist, but I am a realist. I am someone who looks through all the obstacles before I can make progress and it's helped me focus less on the obstacles and more on the end goal, which was not a natural for me at all. It helped me understand other people as well – through AI I look at and understand other people at work and outside in another way, trying to find common ground first. It's helped me with coaching people; it's helped at work, with relationships and with my kids. I do this naturally with kids. I am very strengths-based with them – always looking at what they can achieve as opposed to what they can't. It's a fantastic tool for work relationships and for personal relationships to figure out what we agree on instead of what do we disagree on and it makes such a difference!

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Purpose of AI Practitioner

This publication is for people interested in making the world a better place using positive relational approaches to change such as Appreciative Inquiry. The publication is distributed quarterly: February, May, August and November.

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ISSN 1741 8224

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