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Green Is Not Really Lean; Lean focuses on whether existing processes add value. Green efforts focus on decreasing the carbon footprint.

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Implementation of Lean management has been steadily growing over the past few years as the printing industry has discovered its many benefits. Concurrently, the education around green operations has been gaining momentum as firms take action to reduce their eco-impacts. Along the way, the two frequently become combined, and printing firms initiate branding efforts to describe their operations as "green and lean."

Lean isn't green, although the two rhyme nicely and some logical ties can be made between the efforts. Lean practices reduce waste, and waste minimization is ecologically sound. Conversely, many green efforts focus on decreasing existing carbon footprints. But these efforts are typically focused on improving existing processes, while Lean focuses first on whether existing processes truly add any value to the customer.

The practices center on different goals and implementation methods. Lean is remarkably low tech, more clearly defined and concentrates on the management aspect of a firm. Being green is not so clearly defined, as it can mean compliance with regulations, certifications of materials purchased or various analyses of products, or manufacturing processes', ecological effects.

Firms that are combining the two as a marketing effort risk jeopardizing the benefits of Lean. Buzzwords sell and slogans motivate in the near-term. Catchy marketing phrases and sound bites help staff to better understand concepts in a fast-paced world. But Lean management requires none of these. It does not need to be enhanced or explained with the latest slogan. Lean does not need to be combined or compared. Lean fundamentals are just that: fundamental. Lean management stands unvarnished, and is difficult enough to implement well without tarnishing it or distracting the effort with the latest slogan or label.

Lean is based on two core principles: continuous improvement and respect for people. The continuous improvement portion is typically identified through a series of tools and techniques guided by well-defined policies and practices-some as simple as posting suggestions continuously on a bulletin board. When implemented well, these practices foster a culture that promotes a sense of pride, self-awareness and a commitment to always improve the value-adding processes.

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Lean is supported from the top down and implemented from the bottom up, so it demands empowering workers. The most difficult aspect for a printing company in implementing Lean is the respect for people required to support the effort. This entails changing an organization's culture to involve and expand employees' roles, while shifting management's role from controlling actions to supporting and facilitating the improvement processes. There is no room for command and control management practices in a Lean organization.

Lean requires long-term commitment and a belief in fundamental values to drive behaviors. Unfortunately, with Lean's success a growing subculture of efforts to rebrand or rename its key concepts has emerged. These efforts appear to be targeted at keeping Lean fresh and in step with current thinking on how to best run and improve a business.

Lean and Green is but one example of how marketing efforts are diluting the strength offered by the Lean philosophy. Companies have also started promoting "Lean Sigma," a combination of Six Sigma-one of several traditional continuous improvement practice methodologies-and Lean practices. These firms typically started with a Six Sigma approach and are now trying to transition to Lean. Rebranding their efforts may seem logical, but can readily confuse and distract employees who view efforts as "management once again changing course and destination."

Six Sigma has been well documented for helping Motorola become a far better manufacturer of products. It focuses on driving out variation in process steps to produce consistent, defect-free product. This is a fine goal and clearly can improve existing manufacturing processes. Six Sigma does improve existing processes' performance, but unlike Lean, it typically does not question whether existing processes truly add value to a customer or if a fundamentally different process might be better. Improvement is good, but a Lean practitioner will look at the entire value chain, and work to eliminate any processes not adding customer value. Lean also standardizes work and drives waste out of every process step. If a company is truly embracing Lean management, there is little value to be added by layering on the expenses of training employees in statistical process controls and the micro-focus of a Six Sigma effort.

How many S's can you support?

Similarly, many companies are touting 6S or even 7S processes, which seem to be an enhancement to Lean's original 5S approach. The original 5S process-sort, straighten, shine, standardize, and sustain-requires tremendous effort and a cultural change embracing teamwork and empowerment. The most difficult "S" of all is sustain. Safety, most commonly added as a sixth S, and Spirit (the elusive seventh S) are natural byproducts of doing 5S well.

A Lean effort cannot be sustained without spirit, or an empowered, passionate workforce, and safety is clearly enhanced through the elimination of unsafe conditions. Adding safety as a sixth "S" is understandable at some levels, as most every company has existing safety efforts in place prior to moving toward Lean. But it places undue focus on achieving an outcome versus trusting the process to accomplish the outcome desired.

The premise of Lean is simple and requires nothing more than the willingness to follow its principles. Lean practices have stood the competitive test of time over decades of use and refinement; like other basic values in life they are robust in their purity and simplicity. Do you have the will to become Lean, or do you need to rely on the latest slogan to move forward?

Lean & Green Meetings

Kevin Cooper

At the Business of Green media conference at CalPoly State U. January 22, Kevin Cooper joined the "Estimating, Measuring and Managing What Matters" panel. As presentations ranged widely over value stream mapping, lean manufacturing and life cycle analysis, the distinction between green and lean became apparent. Green is one more measureable factor in a sustainable supply chain.

Two upcoming conferences relevant to the topic:

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March 16-18 The National Environmental Health & Safety Conference, Indianapolis. Editor Bill Esler will deliver results of the latest sustainable printing study; Public Printer Bob Tapella keynotes. nehconference.org

April 5-8 The Continuous Improvement Conference, in Lexington, KY. Keynoter Michael Hoseus, co-author of Toyota Culture, will conduct a tour of the Georgetown, KY Toyota plant he managed for 13 years. www.printing.org

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