

The Vermeer Podcast – Episode 16 Start Your Continuous Improvement Journey

Mary Andringa:

Hello, everyone, and welcome back to The Vermeer Podcast series on continuous improvement. I'm Mary Andringa here again with Gary Coppock and Louis Norton. In this last episode of the continuous improvement series, we want to share some key concepts of "lean" with you that can be applied to any business or operation. So, these are those tips about how to get started or how to restart. So, Gary, I'm going to turn it over to you first. What would be a key tip for our listeners?

Gary Coppock:

Thanks, Mary. I think a key tip or at least a key learning from our experience was that as we're teaching people about these different tools and principles to improve their area of responsibility or an area of the business, it would be easy to think, how can anybody not just embrace the change if it's going to make their life easier? But there is this whole change management component that can often be more difficult to work through, especially the personal side of change. And I can remember one situation, and Mary, I believe you were on this event. It was a welding event where we had made some improvements and we were going to move some team members in welding to a different line, which from a business standpoint seemed to make perfect sense.

And we had this one girl who was welding on that line, very experienced, good welder, and she was the one that was going to be moved. And she was just in tears. She didn't disagree with the change, but her comment to us was, "You're taking me away from my family." And what that taught us was how personal change can be. And the way I describe that learning is, we often associate our identity with what we do. So in this case, that person said, "I'm a welder." Well, that's what they do, that's not who they are. But because identity and what we do are so closely associated, when we start to change what we do, or especially when others start to change what we do, then it becomes very personal. And I think it's good to recognize that, understand why people resist change, and make sure we're mindful of those things as we're helping people transition through change.

Mary Andringa:

Yeah. Great. And I was on that event, it was a D33 directional drill event, if I remember right.

Gary Coppock:

Yes. That's correct.

Mary Andringa:

Something similar to that early on, which also taught me the value of asking "five why's," was when we had asked all of our assembling people to take their big chest of tools home and we would provide the tools. And we put them on a shadow board. And one of the employees on that line came up to my husband who was actually also working on that particular event and said, "I don't know why we have to take the tools home. We know there will be people that come through in the middle of the night and steal these tools off the tool boards. This not going to work." And then a day or so later, he came by and said to my husband, "Do you have an office?"

And my husband said, "Yes, I have an office." And he opened up the lid of his tool chest and he said, "This is my office." And inside the lid of his chest were the pictures of his family and the pictures of the deer he had shot last fall. And he said, "So this is my office and you're going to take my office away." So, I think really what that also taught us is that you don't just accept the first answer when people say, "Why do we have to do this? People will steal our tools." That wasn't actually the reason. And by the way, no one did steal our tools during the night. The reason was because there was ownership in that space. And

so we brought lockers in, in the break room so people had a space. So, always thinking about asking more than one "why" to get maybe to the real cause or reason why something is the way it is, or why change is so difficult. So Louis, I'm going to go over to you now, any tips that you've got?

Louis Norton:

Yeah. So, one of the other foundational aspects is workplace organization and visual management. So there's this concept of 5S, which really is a process. And each level of the process starts with the letter S. But it's taking a critical look at a work area and eliminating all of those things that don't add to the process. So, sorting out those things that don't belong, setting in order the things that need to stay so that they have a home, making sure that everything that is there is clean and organized and ready to use, and then standardizing that across all similar areas. And then obviously, the fifth step is sustaining that work as you go forward.

But it's that idea of, like a tool board that you mentioned earlier. If there was a tool missing off of that tool board, it would be immediately obvious what was missing as opposed to going to a drawer in a tool box that's just chuck full of tools, right? Being able to look in and know exactly what was missing and quickly being able to do that. And then also applying that same logic, not just on the shop floor, but also in the office. And again, as you think about email and just electronic files, what's your filing system, and how quickly can you get to what it is that you're looking for? So, one of the challenges that we've had is anything that's electronically filed, can you find that document within 15 seconds? And really using that as a test to see how well organized you are.

Mary Andringa:

Yeah. Fantastic. And I still think about that when I'm searching for something and realize, okay, I've got three files here and I've got to check into each one of them to see if it's got what I want in it. You mentioned sustainment also Louis, and our consultants always told us sustainment is one of the toughest things. I guess, I'm going to ask both of you, what are the tips you have on how to sustain improvements? Louis, I don't know if you want to start?

Louis Norton:

Yeah. I think when you do a project of any nature, if you don't finish it when you get started, finishing the work is the first critical step. And then being able to work with the team and have some accountability and coming back to that to make sure it's done. And an easy way to do that, again, is with visual management. What kind of a metric can you put in place to measure or monitor the process and make it as visual as possible so that you can very quickly look at the metric and understand whether you're having success or not?

Mary Andringa:

Fantastic. Gary, do you have anything to add to that, and maybe even talking a little about our boards that we have in the plants?

Gary Coppock:

Yeah. I think the performance boards or managing for daily improvement boards were a way for us to understand how we're doing and identify where opportunities for improvement are. But if I back up from there, when I think about how long it took to get those implemented and get buy-in for those, I think one tip to keep in mind is, understanding why you're starting this journey and being able to convey that to the organization. Everybody's going to want to know what's in it for them, because I'm sure like most organizations there's been programs that have come and gone over the years. And this one is really truly a journey. It's going to take a long time, there's always room for improvement. But if team members don't understand what's in it for them, it's hard to get the buy-in and that can work against you when it comes to sustainment.

So, being able to communicate that. I remember us doing a lot of communication about what continuous improvement was, what lean is, formulating a vision of where we think this can take us and trying to get everybody rallied around that. But then understanding what it's going to take to support that part of sustainment is having the resources to support it. And one thing we learned was, as our processes became more lean, they started to expose even more opportunities for improvement. And the way we describe it is, the time from a problem occurring to the time we found it got very short and we had to match that equally with enough resources to reduce the time from when we detect it to when we fix it. And if we don't fix the problems and they keep occurring, then we're going to lose momentum, we're going to lose buy-in from team members, and then all of a sudden the sustainment starts to fall apart.

Mary Andringa:

Yeah. Excellent points. And I remember so well on our performance boards, we have a countermeasure section. And I remember one manager saying, "If we want to sustain this journey, we've got to make sure that we are adhering to what are the countermeasures and making those happen." I also remember when we started on this journey, we heard the story of Taiichi Ohno, and he was the mastermind behind the Toyota production system. And after 40 years, he said, "I think we're starting to get it." So, it really is a journey. And not to discourage anyone from starting it because it is a journey and you can see improvements early on if you're really looking for them. So, just maybe a final question from each one of you, where are the resources that people can dig into to learn more about lean, continuous improvement? Gary?

Gary Coppock:

Well, if you did a search on the internet around either of those terms or the Toyota production system, you'll find a lot of information describing the tools and the principles of it. But I think it's good to do some education through reading about some of the background and maybe a more relatable, practical application. So, a couple of resources that come to mind to me are, there's a book called "All You Need to Know about Manufacturing I Learned in Joe's Garage." It's an easy, short read, but it does convey the basic lean principles. Another one is "2-second Lean," which has some good examples of how to apply it. For those that like to dig into a little more of the theory and the history, probably the best book is "The Toyota Way." And there's several offshoots of that around "Developing Lean Leaders at All Levels" and "The Toyota Way Fieldbook", all good resources.

Some of them are a little heavier reading than others, but they do explain the development of those principles and what they're intended for and how to apply them. So to me, the place to start is just educate yourself, just jump in, read, benchmark other organizations, and take the opportunity to participate when you have the chance. I think in some of the previous episodes we each talked about having participated in some early events, and that's really where the learning happens. You can read a lot, that's theory, but the application is when you're participating in the work.

Mary Andringa:

Great tips. Louis, do you have anything to add to that?

Louis Norton:

Yeah. I think to Gary's point, I think the biggest thing is, after you've done a little education, you just need to get started. Pick a small project and get involved. It needs to be something that matters, but just get started. You'll stumble for sure. But you need to get started to learn. Again, we talked a lot about project management, people management, change management, but remember to focus on the process and not the people. It's the process that's broken. There will definitely be personalities along the way that maybe difficult or maybe encouraging, but it's the process in the background that you really need to think about.

Mary Andringa:

Great. Well, I would like to thank both Gary and Louis. You are two of our great experts at Vermeer, and you've also been great teachers. You've mentored a lot of other team members on continuous improvement, and thank you very much for sharing your experiences. And to all of you who are listening, thank you for taking the time to learn a little bit about continuous improvement and the lean journey. As you could tell, we are believers in CI, continuous improvement, because we know the process works. So, thank you and best wishes as you go on your lean journey.