



How „The Lean Manager“ Influenced My Life

by Michael Retzlaff

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1 Introduction

When Michael asked me if I could write an article about how “The Lean Manager” influenced my life, I was electrified. First, I have never done such a thing before. Second, most importantly, I wanted to start right away.

In my professional life I am in a position without much lean- experience, without support (Sensei) and little means to work on our vision. But at least we have a vision and a strong will to put it into reality.

What do I do for a living? I’m a trained engineer with more than ten years work experience and currently head of industrialization and logistics in a service center for diesel locomotives. We are about 100 people working there. It’s a low volume, high variation environment. As John (cf. Dennis 2019) pointed out, it’s like ‘craft manufacturing’. Without going too much into detail, our main objective for the near future is reducing lead time considerably, for me that means by half!

Our vision is roughly translated “Moers’ locomotive services keep you mobile. We’re there for you!”¹ (cf. Vossloh Locomotives GmbH, Service-Zentrum Moers 2018) directly addressing the customer.

2 Influence on My Professional Life

With the conditions above (little experience and no teacher) I still wanted to change things to the better. And with „The Lean Manager“, I had the chance to live the journey through the eyes of Andrew Ward. Plant manager Ward is the main character of the book. He leads his people and himself on a lean journey to save his plant.

¹ Original: „Lok-Service aus Moers hält Sie mobil. Wir sind für Sie da!“

Of course, like reading a traveler's blog, it's still very different, if you actually visit the place yourself or if you just read about it. But still, why make the same mistakes twice or not learn from experiences of others?

On his way, the CEO Phil Jenkinson (and his friends Amy and Bob Woods) is constantly teaching Ward. But they don't just tell, they mostly ask questions to bring Ward out of his comfort zone. That's really tough, as Michael (cf. Ballé 2018) pointed out.

In the book, written as a story, still is hidden a complete textbook! Usually hidden in the coaching parts of Jenkinson or one of the Woods, heavy content is presented, as these examples about Gemba show:

“Go and see is the entry ticket into lean management“ (Ballé; Ballé 2009: 167)

“Go and see is a management technique [...] with four clear dimensions:

First it's about developing judgement by testing hypotheses. Go and see is the only way whether we are right or whether we have misconceptions.

Second, it's about building consensus by getting people to agree on the problem before debating the solution. Most conflict I see in business involves managers arguing about solutions when they don't agree on what the problem really is. [...] If they don't share a common view of the problem, why should they buy into the solution?

Third, it's about *achieving goals at the desired speed by checking regularly where people are* in their implementation and helping them if they run into difficulties. In this way, we can learn to think high-level goals with detailed shop-floor implementation and find out where the real difficulties are. And we develop better Judgement about where and how invest resources.

Forth, it's about empowering people by involving them. Involving operators starts by sharing the company's objectives with them and solving their vexing problems immediately. Middle manager's involvement can be seen at how well they maintain the visual management system. Very often, people in the organization get stuck by needing either an authorization or a small push that is easy for senior managers, but hard for them“ (Ballé; Ballé 2009: 168)

“Go and see is about thinking“ (Ballé; Ballé 2009: 168).

But it's not just focusing on tools, but also on people. A part I like particularly:

„Managerial relationships are very strongly asymmetrical: As a manager you have the impression you see the people who report to you every day, but, individually, they see you rarely. As a result, when they do meet you, the moment is very significant for them – and so is your opportunity to trip up and slight people even inadvertently in a way that will irk and hurt. Like getting someone's name wrong“ (Ballé; Ballé 2009: 187)

3 Influence on My Private Life

I could even learn from the book for my private life: “Most conflict I see in business involves managers arguing about solutions when they don't agree on what the problem really is. [...] If they don't share a common view of the problem, why should they buy into the solution? “ (Ballé; Ballé 2009: 168) How often do we also argue in private life with not focusing on the problem? For me it made “click” and I connected the dots to a book I read a long time ago: “The Goal” by Eli Goldratt. It's been written in a similar style as “The Lean Manager” and focusses on the “Theory of Constraints (TOC)” with its problem-solving techniques.

Reading the book at the end of the year, I was in my year's end orientation phase, and the book also explains Toyota's "north star" (Ballé; Ballé 2009: 282, 302). So it was a good reminder to think about "what to do in life"?

4 Conclusion

I'm proud to be asked by Michael Ballé, if I would write this text and I'm really glad I did. I've learned even more and I now really appreciate "The Lean Manager". I will make mistakes: "This is a core assumption of lean: No matter how confident we sound, we are all wrong at least half of the time. The only way of knowing is by testing our beliefs, our hypothesis. This is nothing more than basic scientific thinking. Theories must be backed by empirical evidence" (Ballé; Ballé 2009: 40), but I will still continue my lean journey, only better!

I read a lot so it's something when I say, that I'm really impressed by this book. It is such an easy read, that you barely notice, how much content is hidden inside. "The Lean Manager" is one of the best books I've ever read! Thank you Michael and Freddy for changing my life.

5 About the Author



Michael is loving father, husband and leader, lean-enthusiast, trained engineer (German Diplom-Ingenieur) and lots more, but in that order.

„Try not to become a man of success, but rather try to become a man of value.“ this quote from Albert Einstein is one of his favorite and describes his purpose in life quite well.

He likes to try out new things and learn from them. But he likes even better sharing what he knows. He likes to work with people and help them grow. He is a passionate yet humble leader.

He likes problems. „If truly understood the solution comes easy and they help you grow!“

In Lean he found a new passion. Both pillars, „Continuous Improvement“ and „Respect for People“ apply to him very well.

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