More and more organizations have started using Lean techniques in recent years, with managers from every sector of the economy seeking to purge the waste from business processes. A wealth of literature is now available on the topic, diverse in scope, formality, rigidity, and purpose, and a quick Internet search or trip to the bookstore will reveal an entire universe of process improvement literature and software. A Factory of One approaches the topic of Lean from a personal perspective and tries to help readers become aware of process improvement potentials, combined with an understanding of the historical and theoretical background behind Lean.

The core of Lean, according to Markovitz, is "the development of awareness and problem-solving skills, the capacity for correction, and total dedication to improvement." That basic idea means much more than a smile and an empty e-mail inbox. The goal is "greater efficiency, less waste, and improved focus on customer value," principles that are within easy reach, so long as one correctly applies Lean, Markovitz argues. The book uses metaphors to guide readers through the process, seeing each person as a "factory" with inputs, outputs, and customers. Through this lens, Markovitz helps the reader understand "Lean" for themselves before turning their attention to broader tasks.

CREATING VALUE

Business and leadership books talk a lot about value creation, a somewhat elusive concept. A Factory of One starts with much simpler terms. Markovitz asks readers to find the "value-add" in their own jobs, which begs the question of what that job is and how it gets done on a process level. This diagnostic approach is found throughout the book, starting with an introduction to 5S, the workplace methodology underlying Lean. Markovitz points out that for most people, a vast majority of work-related activities don’t actually add value. Lean uses time tracking, process mapping, and workflow diagrams to help readers visualize their personal factories in economic terms. Once a process can be visualized, it can much more easily be dissected and improved. Waste doesn’t become apparent until we start looking for it — a central focus of the book, and Lean more generally. As the father of Lean, Taiichi Ohno, once said, "Eliminating waste isn’t the problem. Identifying it is."

For Markovitz, "that’s the way the system works" isn’t good enough, and process improvement is nothing if it doesn’t maximize the amount of "flow," or the continuous process of adding value. Flow is encumbered by waste, the enemy of Lean, and visualizing and understanding processes allow us to see and eliminate waste, and maximize the flow in our own factories.
One of the most obvious rhetorical techniques Markovitz uses — and also one of the most contagious — is the practice of constantly asking “why?” with the intention of finding diagnostic answers. Beyond the descriptive level, asking “why” can spotlight waste in a process that previously went unnoticed because of inertia or lack of interest. This constant questioning is a constructive tool for looking at workflow and process maps and can quickly showcase the areas of obvious waste within a process or organization.

SIMPLIFYING WORKFLOW

Contrary to the popular approach of complex categorization, Lean suggests simplifying workflow. Using the example of an employee who receives and processes orders, Markovitz suggests that the best way to organize materials for orders at different stages is not putting them in the same folder, drawer, or filing cabinet. Instead, move each project through three bins — “Incoming,” “Stuff to Read,” and “Outgoing.” He offers a similar suggestion for dealing with e-mail congestion — avoid complex sorting/labeling and institute a two-folder in and out box policy. Many of these easy steps are simply organizational, based on the frequency with which items are used or tasks are performed, while others look to the source of value creation to optimize work time itself.

By focusing on the “Gemba,” a Japanese word for “the place where work gets done,” the book lays a foundation for Lean thinking. One of the most useful tools Markovitz highlights is 4-D, an acronym for a work management checklist: Do, Delegate, Designate, and Discard. As a filter for incoming tasks, 4-D has many advantages over more natural approaches. While it is specifically designed for personal work management, it operates best when everyone on a team uses it. Markovitz points to NASA’s $327 million blunder on the Mars Climate Orbiter Project and how failing to catch a unit conversion error in an email led to the space craft incinerating itself in the red planet’s atmosphere prematurely. If NASA had followed a 4-D process with all communications and tasks, it could have easily prevented such a basic and costly mistake. This is a fairly dramatic example, but it does demonstrate the degree to which basic mistake-proofing can affect a value stream and a final product. Lean tools such as 4-D can be very useful for ensuring that errors don’t slip through the cracks and return to haunt the project later.

CONCLUSIONS

A Factory of One is an insightful book that provides easily adopted, common sense approaches to maximize one’s performance in the workplace. Finding value, eliminating waste, and optimizing our potential involves more than cleaning out our desks or alphabetizing the company library (although those steps surely won’t hurt). It requires careful recognition and evaluation of workflow strategies and an awareness that continuous process improvement requires a mindset as well as its toolbox of simple, proven strategies.

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