

Bob Emiliani Interview Questions and Answers

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www.bobemiliani.com

Q. You are very committed to Lean management. Why?

A. I am committed to Lean management because I think it is a better way to lead and manage organizations. It is a human-centered management system. No management system is perfect, but I think if managers are attentive to both Lean principles, “Continuous Improvement” and “Respect for People,” the methods and tools, and the details, then good outcomes will be achieved on an ongoing basis.

Q. How long does it generally take for an organization to adopt Lean?

Organizations can make very good progress in just a few years. However, there is never any possibility of becoming Lean, just as there is never any possibility of leading perfectly. There are always some errors that take you backwards, or changes in the environment that require adjustments to be made. The challenge is to quickly recognize errors and changes in the environment and continue to move forward. It is very much like being a musician who must practice every day to maintain and improve their capabilities.

Q. I read an article where you said that companies wishing to foster a Lean culture should learn from successful rock bands. What do you mean by that?

A. I mean that there are many similarities between Lean management and music. For example: both require a lot of thinking and practice; teamwork is very important; timing, sequence, and synchronization must be carefully understood; errors are broken into small parts and closely examined and corrected; problems are solved one-by-one; music has rules and so does Lean; and so on. Daily practice is truly the key to success. Without practice, you cannot become a musician. Without practice, you cannot become a Lean leader. Every leader, whether established or aspiring, must practice.

Q. What are the four most common errors that leaders make when implementing Lean? How do we avoid these errors?

A. The first one is to think that Lean means cost-cutting, when, in fact, it means growth. The second most common error is to think that Lean management is easy. Many leaders read part of a book and think they understand Lean. You have to actually apply Lean principles and practices at work every day to understand it. The third most common error is for managers to bring their old leadership thinking and habits into the new Lean environment. The fourth most common error is when managers ignore the “Respect for People” principle. They think they know what it means or that it is not necessary in order to have daily continuous improvement. This is a big mistake. The “Respect for People” principle enables continuous improvement.

Q. What advice do you give to managers?

A. Be humble. Recognize that the way we have all been educated in school and trained at work is to process information in ways that are the opposite of Lean. So there is much to learn with Lean management. Getting material and information to flow sounds easy, but it is quite a challenge. Also, Lean requires a long-term commitment to learning and to develop a non-zero-sum (win-win) mindset. The good news is that it is also a lot of fun if you do it right.

Q. What advice do you give to employees?

A. Participate in improvement activities. Everyone, managers and employees, needs to learn and improve their understanding and practice of Lean management. The managers are learning too, so do not judge them

harshly. They will make mistakes, but hopefully able to freely admit mistakes so that they and others can improve. In Lean, mistakes are seen as little gems because they tell people what to work on and help people learn.

Q. What distinguishing qualities should managers have?

A. Some distinguishing characteristics for managers are the ability to admit they do not know it all, an enthusiasm to learn new things, and a strong desire to participate in new experiences such as kaizen. The managers should themselves practice what they ask others to do, such as root cause analysis, visual controls, A3 problem-solving, etc. This demonstrates management credibility and builds organizational commitment to Lean.

Q. What distinguishing qualities should employees have?

A. Some distinguishing characteristics for employees are developing the ability to think deeply about your work and ask questions. In most organizations, employees follow orders from managers who are supposed to know everything. In a Lean organization, managers do not know everything and act as facilitators to help people improve their ability to recognize problems, how to quickly analyze problems, and how to identify root causes and implement practical countermeasures. Lean is sometimes referred to as the “Thinking Management System” because it requires everyone - employees and managers – to think deeply about processes and how to improve them in non-zero-sum (win-win) ways.

Q. You talk about Behavioral Waste[®] as the eight form of waste. How do you define that?

A. I was the first to present this concept in a paper I wrote in 1998 called “Lean Behaviors.” It is defined as “behaviors that do not add value and can be eliminated,” or “behaviors that add cost but do not add value.” It is the behaviors of managers that repel people, such as blaming people for problems, being condescending, micro-managing, office politics, etc. These types of behaviors are zero-sum in that the manager wins at someone else’s expense, and are obviously inconsistent with the “Respect for People” principle.

Q. You talk about Lean as something that makes work more enjoyable and rewarding. How?

A. It is more rewarding and enjoyable because people become more involved in understanding their processes and finding ways to improve them that result in better outcomes for themselves and others. People participate together in learning and improvement, which for most people makes for a much better work experience. People are not blamed for problems. That also makes for a much better work experience. As a human-centered management system, Lean promotes positive social interaction, which, among other things, reduces barriers between people and departments.

Q. Lean implies that employees are highly motivated and committed to continuous improvements. Can you really expect people to always put their heart and soul into their job?

A. In Lean management we always try to see reality clearly. So, the reality of work is that people’s motivation and commitment varies over time and is affected by many things such as their supervisor, their age, their health, their home-life, etc. Leaders must recognize this. However, if managers make Lean fun, then people will be drawn to it and have high levels of motivation and commitment for a long time.

Q. Do you see any risk that Lean can put too much pressure on staff to perform their work quickly and always strive to better their work?

A. If workers are being sped-up, then something has gone terribly wrong. The objective is not to speed up workers; it is to eliminate queues. Staff will not embrace Lean management if the outcome for them is zero-sum. The pace of work must reflect actual customer demand, but staffed in a way so that the pace never burns people out. And there should be frequent job rotation for skills development and to improve flexibility and responsiveness to changing conditions.

Managers should never say things like “we must have flawless execution,” “do it right the first time,” or “perfection.” These are unrealistic and often simply another way to blame people for problems. Importantly, these phrases signal to people that they cannot fail. It tells them that they should not try and new things. Therefore, it cuts off learning. The fundamental of Lean is to expose problems so that they can be eliminated. If managers say “flawless execution,” then people will not expose problems.

These are examples of bringing old ways of thinking into the new Lean management. Forgetting about the “Respect for People” principle makes Lean bad instead of fun. When Lean is done right, people have no problem to strive to better their work. A lot depends on the leaders of the organization to correctly understand and practice Lean management.

- Q. Some employees will feel that work has become more restricted. New working methods will lead to shorter lead-times for the benefit of the end-use customers, but employees will feel that they cannot plan their daily work as freely as they did before. Their work has become more rigidly scheduled. How to respond to that?
- A. It is OK for activities to become more rigidly scheduled, but doing so will reveal new problems that must be recognized and addressed. This is also what kaizen is for; to solve new problems that pop up as changes are made. In most cases, work becomes more rigidly scheduled and the problems it creates for staff and others are ignored. This outcome is bad, and it is also inconsistent with the “Respect for People” principle. That is why this principle is so important.
- Q. What do you say about employees who do not want Lean and spread negative views of false information?
- A. The more likely problem is that negative views and false information will be spread by senior managers who misunderstand and misapply Lean management. Sometimes, it is caused by influential employees who do not understand Lean and spread bad information. The basic idea is “change for the better” for all stakeholders. If management makes “change for the worse” for employees, then employees will of course develop a negative view of Lean. Management has to “hit the books” and do some studying to understand REAL Lean and avoid the trap of falling into Fake Lean. Fake Lean is very difficult for managers to correct, so it is better to start with a good understanding of REAL Lean. Just as for customers, Lean has to result in meaningful benefits and improvements for staff. If they do not experience this, then continuous improvement quickly dies. People want what is good for them. Lean is good for employees and all stakeholders if it is correctly understood and practiced. It is also the most fun you will ever have at work.
- Q. How do you enhance human creativity when the work becomes more standardized?
- A. Standardized work is simply the team’s agreed-upon way to do the work until people think of new ideas on how to improve the work. These new ideas happen daily, so standardized work should be revised often in response to the thinking and creativity of workers. There should be a flip-chart located in all work areas so that workers can write down their improvement ideas for the team to evaluate at least once a week. Managers should also understand standardized work and apply it to their jobs to learn its true meaning and how to use it effectively throughout the enterprise. Standardized work is definitely not the “one best way” to do the work because that goes against the meaning of continuous improvement.
- Q. You emphasize that Lean is a non-zero-sum system and that there should be something to be gained for everyone - customers, employees, suppliers, investors, and communities. How is that principle consistent with a customer-first attitude? Shouldn’t you focus on the opportunities for the end-use customer rather than for the employees?
- A. The “customer-first” attitude is intended to help ensure that managers and employees are focused on the wants and needs of end-use customers (and sometimes intermediate customers as well). But if customers win at employees’ or suppliers’ expense, then customers will eventually lose as employees and suppliers disengage from improvement activities. With Lean, you strive to achieve a thoughtful balance between the needs of the various stakeholders. Customers stand out in part because of their role in specifying value.

Their perspective on value largely determines what internal activities to perform. Accepting the customer's perspective of value helps managers and employees to learn the difference between value-added work, non-value-added but necessary work, and waste. The customer-first perspective works together with the requirement to achieve non-zero-sum (win-win outcomes). They do not conflict with each other.

Q. Does Lean management fit with organizations that reward managers and employees with financial bonuses?

A. Financial bonuses for workers and managers are compatible with Lean, but care must be taken to make sure that the structure and timing of the bonus is consistent with Lean principles and practices. Bonus systems that reduce teamwork would be inconsistent with Lean, as would bonuses awarded annually. The bonus must help reinforce the application of Lean principles and practices and should be awarded at least once per quarter.

Q. You talk a lot about the "Respect for People" principle. It sounds like a natural thing to do. Why is it so difficult?

A. It does indeed sound like a natural thing to do, but it is not. That is because managers usually do not see the connection between the "Respect for People" principle and flow. Also, most managers have only a very superficial understanding of "Respect for People," usually as listening or courtesy. It is difficult for the reasons cited in the previous questions and answers. For example, in Lean it is very easy to do what looks like the right thing, but is actually only a small modification of the old non-Lean way of thinking and doing things. The modification can easily make things much worse for people. They will complain and management often ignores the complaints, when instead management must be very attentive to them. This is the reason why everyone must participate in kaizen to understand the problem and work as a team member to identify and implement practical countermeasures. Kaizen is closely tied to the "Respect for People" principle.

Q. What does "Respect for People" mean and why is it so important?

A. The "Respect for People" principle is what makes Lean management work. Without it, all you have is a slightly more efficient way of working, one that causes many burdens to employees and other stakeholders. This principle is important because nearly every organization fails to understand it, which results in Fake Lean. Leaders assume they know what the "Respect for People" principle means, but they do not. It is a fundamental mistake.

Q. Could you expand on the "Respect for People" principle from a customer perspective?

A. For example, managers often say they are customer-focused, but you can easily tell they are not customer-focused by what they actually do. Managers' decisions are especially informative for revealing what they perceive to be really important - which is usually not customers. In many cases, managers are not even aware of the disconnect between what they say and what they do. But this disconnect means they do not understand "Respect for People," where "people" in this example are customers. If they did, the gap would be much smaller or not exist at all.

"Respect for People" from the customer's perspective means also to understand that customer's wants and needs are not static; they change over time, and so organizations must be responsive to customers' evolving perspective of value and be flexible to adapt. Sometimes being responsive to customers means to develop new capabilities, though doing so may be difficult. You know managers are focused on customers when they are a bit uncomfortable. Their discomfort comes from having to learn and do new things.

Q. Companies use Lean to improve internal work activities. Is that the right thing to do?

A. Yes, but most companies do not go far enough. You have to improve internal activities daily, yet most organizations fail to pull these improvements through to the customer. Why practice Lean management if the customer does not see any benefit from it? Customers must experience benefits from Lean

management, which will help the organization grow and further improve. Always remember that Lean is a non-zero-sum (win-win) management system guided by the “Continuous Improvement” and “Respect for People” principles. The word “people” in “Respect for People,” means employees, customers, suppliers, investors, and communities. To make things worse for any or all stakeholders is anti-Lean, and customers, for example, will be unhappy and go away. Lean is not a way to improve for my own internal benefit. Customers must see the benefits of Lean management.

Q. How can a company influence their suppliers to adopt Lean management?

A. Companies generally use one of the two following approaches. The first is for the organization to gain basic competency with Lean and then introduce what they have learned to their suppliers. The positive feature is that the organization gains credibility. The negative feature is that it may take 3, 5, or 7 years for the organization to gain basic competency with Lean principles and practices. So there will be a large delay in introducing Lean to suppliers. The second way is to tell suppliers what the organization is trying to do over the next several years and then ask suppliers to do the same, in parallel. This way, they go on the Lean journey together and can jointly work on problems to yield mutually beneficial outcomes. In both cases, management must be sure to work with suppliers in a non-zero-sum (win-win) way. This means they must begin to understand suppliers’ interests and break free of past zero-sum (win-lose) way of dealing with them.

Q. Do you see any differences in how Lean management is practiced in different countries?

A. There is a rather uniform difficulty in introducing Lean management organizations in all countries because it is a different way for people to think and do things. While there may be some cultural differences, they seem to be few in number and not much of a problem. The bigger problem is that Lean management must be led from the top; by successful people who have 20 or 30 years of experience in non-Lean management. This is a very large barrier to learning Lean management.

Q. How would you describe the current status of Lean management internationally - is it gaining ground?

A. It seems that at the present time Lean management both gains ground and loses ground. Many organizations internationally decide to adopt Lean management, which means it gains ground. But then senior managers practice zero-sum Fake Lean - only the “Continuous Improvement” principle - so it loses ground. Unfortunately, there is much more Fake Lean than REAL Lean. Fake Lean gives people, especially employees and suppliers, a bad experience, which of course does not result in gaining ground. To really gain ground, Lean must give people good experiences. This will enable greater populist support.

Q. What do you think are the top barriers that organizations face before we are able to practice Lean correctly?

A. All organizations face the same barriers. Leaders mistakenly think Lean is easy to understand and do; ignoring the “Respect for People” principle; management delegating Lean instead of practicing Lean themselves; thinking of kaizen as an event instead of a daily activity; continuing to use metrics that are incompatible with Lean; achieving isolated improvements and failing to connect these improvements to achieve flow; making daily improvement a burden instead of an opportunity to learn and have fun; thinking your organization is different and that Lean won’t work for this or that; cherry-picking Lean tools; using Lean tools superficially, etc. I am not kidding when I say there is a lot to learn. But fortunately, these are good things to learn because they improve people’s lives.

M.L. “Bob” Emiliani is President of [The CLBM, LLC](#). Bob worked for 20 years in manufacturing and service industries, and has implemented Lean principles and practices on the manufacturing shop floor, in supply networks, and in higher education. Bob has authored ten books and over 30 papers on various aspects of Lean management. Copyright © 2011 M.L. “Bob” Emiliani.