

Answers Hiding in Plain Sight?

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My work has been focused on Lean leadership since the mid-1990s. As a result, I have observed and thought much about what it takes to be an effective Lean leader. I have also given a lot of thought to why we have so few great examples of Lean management in organizations despite the effort of so many people over the last four decades. This brings me to three related questions, which you have probably asked as well:

- Why are so many organizations still ignorant about Lean management?
- Why do we have so much Fake Lean management?
- Why do we have so little REAL Lean management?

To refresh your memory, Fake Lean is the application of continuous improvement tools alone, and REAL Lean is the application of both “Continuous Improvement” and “Respect for People” principles and related practices.

I have searched hard for answers to these questions, chased dozens of leads, and uncovered hundreds of interesting and useful details. I learned a lot and share everything I know with others. Does my work provide specific and actionable direction that helps advance Lean among some top executives? Yes, it certainly does. But the three questions remain, and that bothers me. Once in a while the answer to vexing questions are simple and hiding in plain sight. Maybe this is the case for Lean management.

Below is a simplified characterization of executives that, based upon my experience, I believe to be broadly accurate. The table below places top executives into one of five categories, lists their percent in the population of executives (an educated guess), and includes a brief rationale. It is not intended to blame or praise anyone, but only to describe a phenomenon. While no executive would openly admit to being in either of the first two categories, I think they capture the actual situation deep beneath the surface. Finally, the key assumption for the EDCL is that Lean management has to be led top down, and there is ample empirical evidence to support that.

Executive Diagnostic Characterization for Lean (EDCL)*

Tired CEO / President	45%	Mentally or physically worn out by exposure to decades of batch-and-queue processing. Lean is OK for others to do. Abundance of Fake Lean and layoffs.
Don't Care CEO / President	40%	Talks about change, but actually prefers status quo and stability for self and others. No REALvLean; little or no Fake Lean.
Psychopath CEO / President (sub-criminal)	5%	REAL Lean does not satisfy them in any way (loss of control, fear of failure due to insecurities). Accepts Fake Lean to gain power and control over others. Forces Lean tools onto people and lays many people off.
Don't Know CEO / President	9%	Enthusiastic about change and Lean, but does not know how and can't find the time to to learn or find people who know how.
Enthusiastic CEO / President	1%	Likes to learn and try new things. OK to be and think different. Personally engaged. Strong evidence of REAL Lean.

* Assumption: Lean has to be led, top-down.

Assuming the EDCL is approximately correct, what does it tell us? More specifically, what does it say about where we should focus our efforts to advance REAL Lean management?

You can image that after 30 or more years of dealing with the problems generated by batch-and-queue material and information processing, many executives would, deep down, be physically or mentally exhausted. Who can blame them? While Boards of Directors should always find leaders who have great energy, no matter what their age, it's probably easy for candidates to fool the Board into thinking that they have lots of mental and physical energy. It seems reasonable that they would readily adopt Fake Lean as something for other people to do; those who have much greater mental and physical energy to improve core business processes. The "Tired" executives simply replace their weakness with someone else's strength, and let them do the hard work of Lean thinking and Lean doing.

What about the "Don't Care" CEOs and presidents who are more interested in status-quo and stability, and making sure things do not fall apart during their tenure? Maybe we should focus our attention here and convince some of them that they should care, and that Lean will not make things fall apart. However, we have to realize they are the ones in standing in harm's way (rivals, Board of Directors, shareholders, media, etc.), not us. They likely would not be receptive to taking what they will perceive to be big risks at the pinnacle of their career. For most CEOs and presidents, that's not in their plan and will never be.

The psychopath CEO / president is a big problem for us - and everyone else. While perhaps not great in numbers, they do an incredible amount of damage to people and to Lean management itself. Hopefully Board of Directors conduct good background checks to weed out psychopath CEOs and presidents. But we know empirically that this too is wishful thinking (most of the time). Psychopath CEOs and presidents will never be interested in REAL Lean, though most will use Fake Lean to satisfy their own needs to control people. We surely have no audience here.

Then comes the "Don't Know" CEOs (category and description by Kevin Meyer). They care a lot about their people, their customers, and the company, and know that there are better ways to do things. They also know there are people out there who are smarter than him. They have likely read about and comprehend the power of Lean. They want to be REAL Lean leaders but do not know where to begin.

What about the 1 percent category? It means that Lean management, REAL Lean, appeals to very few people. While that may not be what we want to hear, perhaps the market we have for Lean management is exactly what it should be: about 1 percent. If that is indeed true, then we should focus our more of efforts on the 1 percent of current and future top executives who are enthusiastic about Lean and help them.

In summary, it seems that we should be able to find an audience among a small percentage of the "Tired" executives, a larger percentage among the "Don't Care" executives, and an even larger percentage among the "Don't Know" executives. We know from experience that "Enthusiastic" executives are largely unsuccessful at convincing the "Tired" and "Don't Care" executives of the merits of REAL Lean management. So we should not waste their time asking them to convince others of the merits of Lean. Their time is much better spent at work. But we also know that the "Tired" and "Psychopath" executives are very influential at convincing others to adopt Fake Lean. How can we modify or stop that?

This raises some important questions: What strategy can be used to develop interest in REAL Lean among some of the "Tired" executives? Would the strategy be different for the "Don't Care" executives? What can we do to better support the "Don't Know" and the "Enthusiastic" 1 percent? What about consultants? Who do you think they like to target for Fake Lean – "Tired," "Psychopath," and "Don't Know" executives? Can we do anything about that? Should we even try?

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