



Leadership Considerations for the Lean Chief Transformation Officer

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Introduction

Having spent 9 years in the role of Vice President, Danaher Business Systems (DBS), I quite frankly found it to be the most challenging professional position of my career. I refer to this position as a Chinese Water Torture. In most jobs, you are regularly measured on performance. I held senior financial, operational and general management positions where my performance was measured sometimes on a daily and even hourly basis. Feedback was aplenty. In the DBS role, the silence was deafening when it came to feedback. Most feedback I did receive was qualitative where opinion ruled. Many times, this feedback was not based in fact but emotion. As you are attempting to influence change, it was sometimes open season to take a shot at the DBS guy which usually translated into code that other leaders were not buying into changing their business. The thing I needed to learn was that that my success was a result of others' success. This is very hard to do in a world where performance is regularly evaluated in a high performing company such as Danaher.

So, I have developed some thoughts for those who are in a position to play a leadership role for their organization in this type of "DBS" transformation capacity. These leadership principles and suggestions are designed to address this type of leadership position which is, in my opinion, unique to any other leadership position in the organization.

Leadership Thoughts for the Chief Transformation Officer

- Although results are critical, be sure that the transformation that you lead develops your leaders and employees in Lean principles and tacit knowhow. You must have a process (Strategy Deployment) for selecting the most strategically oriented improvement imperatives and you must deliver results. But you cannot be looked at as "hired hands" to implement these priorities without a conscious effort to transfer knowhow to the organization. Teaching others "how to fish" is a mandate. Do not fish for others as your organization will not grow and will eventually starve.
- Do not fall in the trap that you yourself must know how a change initiative is going to be accomplished. Just because you do not envision it does not mean it cannot be done. Do not be a roadblock to change. Have faith in your people and the process.
- Always challenge the premise before getting into the details of change. An example was when we were called in to reduce the phone waiting time that customers were experiencing in our technical call center. We could have dove right into the details to

improve the call wait time by not challenging the notion as to why customers were calling in the first place. By doing so, the whole nature of the change initiative was recalibrated by looking at any call to the call center as a defect. We then used classical problem-solving tools to quarantine the most significant “defects” and used the appropriate tools to reduce call volume while improving customer satisfaction. Make sure you are solving the right problem.

- Get comfortable with being uncomfortable. Change is hard. Getting others to change is even harder. Remember that their success is your success. It is not about you; it is about the mission. The military is the best at this. They are conditioned to place the mission over self. When the US Olympic Hockey Team won the Gold Medal, the head coach turned and walked directly into the locker room while his team was celebrating on the ice. That was selfless. That is what a successful Lean leader needs to get comfortable with.
- Be sure to spend enough time on Thought Leadership. We are typically conditioned to “check the box” and get things done. It could be very uncomfortable to sit back for a half a day and just brainstorm ideas and concepts. As the Chief Transformation Officer, you need to get comfortable with doing this.
- Do not operate in a vacuum. You must socialize your ideas with the CEO and his/her leadership team. They need to be viewed as an extension of your transformation office and viewed as thought leaders. In this way, they will have buy-in to the Lean business system that you are trying to create. Also, it provides you a wonderful opportunity to coach and teach these leaders on the fundamental principles of Lean.
- There are many Lean principles that you will be espousing as you attempt to indoctrinate change within your organization. However, principles without a corresponding process are just slogans that will have no meaning and will eventually create frustration. For example, I recently asked a CEO and his leaders if they agreed in the notion that one of the fundamental principles of leadership is to develop their people. They all agreed and claimed that they embraced this principle. When I asked how they develop their people, the room went silent. They had no meaningful process to develop their people, such as a career development process. Another example was asking them if they believed that they have a problem-solving culture where problems are solved at the “lowest possible, highest necessary” level in the organization. They all agreed but had no meaningful problem-solving process to teach their employees and failed to even offer the time for employees to work on solving problems. Principles must be actionable and backed up by meaningful processes.
- In the continual effort to look for waste and make improvements, there is a tendency to always look at the glass half empty. Consistently living in the negative can be taxing and not healthy. You must celebrate and promote the success while maintaining a “healthy dissatisfaction with the status quo.” This is a journey. Enjoy the journey and stop to smell the roses once in a while.
- Learn to lead as if you have no power. You must learn to influence and also allow you, your team and others to make mistakes. And don’t let perfect get in the way of better.
- Finally, be sure to stick to the basics of Lean. Resist the urge to lunge at the latest silver bullet that some consultant puts out into the marketplace. The basics work! It’s all hard work and there are no silver bullets. But it is greatly rewarding!

Conclusion

The role of the Chief Transformation Officer is complex and difficult. There are many nuances and not everyone is conditioned to thrive in an environment that is nowhere near as black and white as more traditional roles within the organization. Learning to keep your focus on tacit skills transfer as well as teaching leaders how to think, consistent with the principles, is the first and foremost responsibility of the CTO. This is the only way to truly evolve your culture.