

What I Learned from Two Decades of Asking Questions About Lean

by [Professor Bob Emiliani](#) • 16 April 2019 • ©bobemiliani • [bobemiliani.com](#)

My criticisms of Lean management have been wide-ranging, but their overarching focus has been the harm done to people (employees, suppliers, customers, shareholders, and communities) based on flawed Western interpretations of TPS and The Toyota Way. It was not until 2008 that Lean movement leaders recognized the “Respect for People” principle. By that time, much harm had been done to people, particularly employees (e.g. layoffs), and, after three decades, there has been precious few successful Lean transformations. Wouldn’t organizations be more successful with Lean if more diverse information were widely available; information that would emerge from questioning, challenging, and critiquing Lean?

The consistent response to my criticisms of Lean management by Lean movement leaders has not been to challenge that facts I presented. Instead, they say “it’s all about tone.” The tone of the criticism was used to override and ignore the facts and turned around for the purpose of pointing to the messenger as the problem – complete with name-calling, gossip, innuendo, debasement of the work, and blacklisting. Speaking the truth led powerful Lean community leaders to a false, simplistic, and self-serving, assessment: “You’ve gone off the deep end.”

Influential persons asked: “Why does Emiliani think he's the only one who understands Lean?” Given the large body of research, publications, teaching, and practice, it should be obvious that I find both Lean and TPS fascinating, and that I do not, in fact, understand them. I have been diligently searching for more knowledge and greater understanding for more than 25 years. My purpose in criticizing Lean has not been to create discomfort or conflict, but to merely point out the facts of the situation, from which people can learn and improve – that includes Lean movement leaders, executives, managers, Lean practitioners, academics, and others.

Remarkably, criticism of the work of one member of the Guardians of Lean is interpreted as a criticism of the work of all members – as well as an *ad hominem* attack on all members. The inability to distinguish between criticism of the work and *ad hominem* attacks is a revealing indicator of intense defensiveness and conservativeness in a community of Lean leaders who claim devotion to people and progress. That’s how wacky things are in Lean world.

My questions and criticism of Lean management, the obvious and not-so-obvious defects, appear to have been disliked most intensely by those who benefit most from Lean, thus making me the “[bad boy of Lean](#).” Yet, Lean movement leaders have known for a very long time that the general understanding and practice of Lean has been very weak, despite great effort. As James P. Womack recent stated: After 30 years, “there aren’t enough lean practitioners nor successful lean transformations.” Given this fact, criticism of Lean has long been justified.

This leads to fundamental questions about the Lean movement itself: “Why has there been there little tolerance for independent thinking. Why can’t Lean be questioned, challenged, or criticized? Why can’t the construct of Lean be tested, validated, or refuted? Why are independent voices squelched or ignored?” The Lean movement has been partisan and therefore lacking in diversity of thought, inclusion, and timely introspection. Will this be the legacy of Lean movement leaders and of Lean itself? Were I a member of the Guardians of Lean team, I’d rather my legacy be consistent objective evidence of “continuous improvement” and “respect for people.”