

An Open Letter to the Lean Enterprise Institute and the Lean Enterprise Academy

28 February 2016

As the recognized leaders of the Lean movement, I am dismayed by the continuing lack of interest in understanding the root causes of failed Lean transformations. As you know, Fake Lean is far more prevalent than successful Real Lean transformations. While success stories are uplifting and helpful, failed Lean transformations are more valuable. They offer hundreds of opportunities to learn and improve so that workers and other stakeholders are not harmed in the future.

Workers suffer under Fake Lean, which must be recognized and responded to with both sympathy and meaningful action. To not do the most one can to understand the causes of failure and identify countermeasures to help eliminate worker suffering undercuts the credibility of Lean management and diminishes the strength and vitality of the Lean movement, an important cause for which we are all deeply committed.

For nearly 30 years, red andon lights have been turned on in businesses worldwide signaling Lean transformation process problems. Workers are concerned, frustrated, and tired of Fake Lean. Articles critical of Lean mount day-by-day, only to be exceeded by personal stories critical of Lean. Yet, indifference to the plight of workers suggests large gap exists between belief in “Respect for People” and concrete actions. To the extent possible, workers must be protected from Fake Lean.

As leaders of the movement, I believe you are duty-bound to formally analyze Lean failures whenever and wherever it is possible to do so. A good place to begin is with a U.K. grocer and other organizations whose leadership teams you have coached and instructed in Lean management, but where outcomes have faltered. The results of the detailed failure analyses then become a new and important training opportunity for you to help people avoid future failures.

Failed Lean transformations have been my area of study since the mid-1990s, with a particular focus on leadership. So, rather than start from scratch, I hope you have interest in building on this body of work. I offer to you a complete suite of my books and papers on this topic. I also offer to you my A4 failure analysis method template, which has been used successfully for over a decade to formally analyze management failures. I ask for nothing in return.

I am well aware that formal failure analysis might not have a great impact or change things to anyone’s full satisfaction. Yet, it is important to try and progress will surely be made, as Lean people are resourceful, creative, and innovative. The benefits of formal failure analysis, if they cannot be secured for the present, will surely be helpful to people in the future.

Sincerely,



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