

What Do Lean Professionals Have to Say About Their Experiences?



Research and Analysis by

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Background

- Spoke to 7 Mid-Career Lean Professionals, 2 Women and 5 Men, With 7-17 Years of Lean Work Experience, United States-Based, Employed Full-Time, Service and Manufacturing Employments
- Purpose: To Learn More About What is Going On in the “Real World”
- Asked CI Professionals (CIPs) to Speak to These Four Points
 - Successes
 - Likes
 - Difficulties
 - Dislikes
- Requested Candid Responses; Guaranteed Anonymity
- Summarized Their Comments + Analysis, Key Takeaways, Questions, and Personal Thoughts

A Big
“Thank You”
to the
Participants!

Background

Why Look Into This?

For Decades I Have Promoted Lean and Have Influenced
Many People to Become Lean Professionals

I'm Curious: "What is the Personal State of Lean Professionals?"



Happy and Staying With Lean?
Unhappy and Leaving Lean?



Keep This In Mind

Lean Professional is Fundamentally a Different Type of Job



Lean Professional's Job



All Other Jobs
in the Organization*

* For BAU, technological change is more acceptable than work or social (culture) change.

Lean Professional #1 • 11 Years of Experience

Successes	Likes	Difficulties	Dislikes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Ability to influence people through change; changing behaviors and how they engage and interact with their team” • Changed a leader’s behavior in how they interact with their staff from negative to positive • Being able to help senior leaders prioritize and focus on 2-3 things versus everything • Focus problem-solving efforts • Simplify complex problems and provide a framework for systematically resolving problems, including the plan and resources 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Influence and coach culture change • Looking at a system and see how all the parts, upstream and downstream, work together • How behaviors impact others • Relationship building • Being able to help the underdog • “Coaching people away from ‘it’s the person’ [causing the problem] to ‘it’s the process [causing the problem]” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Drives me nuts on how leadership is so focused on tools and not seeing how you need the right culture to be effective wit the tools” • “[Leaders say] ‘we need belts’ – their focus is on credentials to prove worth” • Tools are band-aids; we need the right behaviors • Coaching principles and behaviors • Politics; stay in your lane mentality versus the opportunity to integrate • Showing you value as a CI office • Struggle to show an appropriate ROI that is acceptable to leadership • “I was not feeling valued; started to question my work; frustrated, unhappy, and devalued. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Frustrated with how easily people lose focus and move on to other things • Sustaining and scaling fall flat due to other priorities • Lack on buy-in • Silos and defensiveness • “You [leaders] are paying me for my ideas, my voice, but you don’t want to hear it” • Lean professionals have different ideas of what Lean is and how to apply it; some are super-rigid, others are flexible • Interacting with other Lean professionals; they are judgmental in a negative way; you’re doing it wrong
<h2>Other Comments</h2>			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Treating people with respect is what drew me to Lean [because I was disrespected/abused in my first job] • Internal Lean professionals butt heads with external consultants [which management hires; reason for hiring them is unclear] 			

Lean Professional #2 • 10 Years of Experience

Successes	Likes	Difficulties	Dislikes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Helping people • Relationship-building (trust), coaching • Success is limited: Results are a “roller coaster.” One out of 10 projects succeed. 70% of projects are stopped or abandoned due to changes in strategy, goals, priorities, managers, COVID, etc. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The idea of teamwork, learning together, improving processes, helping people, happiness at work – but this is not real life • Getting positive feedback 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Constantly moving from one full-time job to the next • No success; get feelings of not being good enough or smart enough compared to others who seem to have greater success. “It impacts your mental health” • CI people seen as troublemakers and as bothering people • People are not accountable to Lean professionals • We’re all experiencing the same thing • “It’s been really painful” • “I’m out of Lean in the next 2 to 3 years” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Roller coaster nature of the job • Always caught in the middle between worker and management • “Very challenging, very frustrating” • Frequent changes in managers • Lack of common goals • Exhausted from changing jobs, moving the family • Don’t learn and grow • More important to make the numbers than to improve • All the work and effort you put in, and you never win • Heroes more valued than Lean people • “Shocking to see how short-sighted leadership is”
<h2>Other Comments</h2>			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Best job if one has support and understanding of leaders” • You get into Lean and get stuck in Lean. It’s like you’re in limbo • Should work 2-3 years as a Lean practitioner, then get out of Lean. Go into operational or staff job • Family toll: Negative impact on family. Difficult to vent. Feeling depressed and defeated affects relationships. Saw a therapist. Lean is bad for one’s mental health. “I’m so tired” • I don’t regret it; I learned a lot • My 10-year takeaway is: How not to manage a team; what not to do. It’s been so painful for me that I will do the right thing. That’s not enough, but you have to find something positive • Best job if one has support and understanding of leaders • “Lean works great on paper” 			

Lean Professional #3 • 7 Years of Experience

Successes	Likes	Difficulties	Dislikes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ability to get in with a variety of different organizations and with upper management • Build relationships and trust • It's a relationship-based job; developing partnerships • Help departments and organizations improve • Interacting with top leaders 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Understanding processes; how they do things and what the opportunity is • Cross-functional exposure • Understanding the value stream • Learn the business and industry from a different perspective • Training other in Lean; the what and the how • Building relationships 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • People understand our intent but disagree with it; need better explanation of why we are doing this to deal with skepticism • "It's a cliché [but true]: if the leadership is bought in, that will trickle down to the rest of the organization" • Turnover of top leadership; leadership constantly changes and then you have to start over and build relationships again • Communication; sharing kaizen results with other parts of the organization • CI professionals seen as check-the-box • Lean seen by departments as extra work • Push-back from people who are not involved in kaizen 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "I feel like I was sometimes forgotten about; led me to question myself; what am I not doing right?" • "I felt like an afterthought, that my value was not recognized" • Lean professionals seen as a disruption to people's daily routine • "Managers do not see the value we bring to the organization" • Checking up on people to complete action items • Lack of leadership follow-up after kaizen • Confusion over metrics: metrics reported to leadership and metrics for tracking Lean progress
<h2>Other Comments</h2>			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "It's a very tough job" • It's easy to sell the short-term win, but getting departments to the next level, which takes time, was difficult. We'd lose momentum. We would have to start from square 1 again • "How does a Lean professional know if they are doing a good job? What is the metric? How do you measure the success of the Lean department?" 			

Lean Professional #4 • 10 Years of Experience

Successes	Likes	Difficulties	Dislikes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Navigating my career and staying employed; avoid getting fired” • Leverage CI mindset for to navigate my career; to learn and improve over time • Learning operations in different companies • Recognize when leaders not interested in improving and go elsewhere • Organize and implement an approach to Lean and gain buy-in from leaders in different functions • Achieved significant cost savings and success based on voice of customer 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Great job for systems thinkers • “Engaging the whole spectrum of the business; cross-functional interaction” • Get a lot of visibility into the inner workings of the business • Networking • “Opportunity to call things out when I see them” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consistently have to fight for, argue, and get detailed data to show improvement is needed • Leaders are not happy when I disagree with them • Had to work on my abilities to develop the information needed in support of opportunities for improvement that I identify • “There is always a reason why I cannot proceed with my improvement proposal; bosses always find something that was not considered; leaders have the solution in mind and expect me to read their mind; feels belittling and makes me question my sanity” • Leaders shorten the learning process needed to understand the problem • Cultural alignment across all functions is a major challenge 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Senior CI positions go to yes people who overstate their Lean education and experience; committed and passionate people such as myself are readily dismissed in what I have to say about improvement opportunities • “It’s thankless and there is a lot of opposition to change” • Over time, there has been no improvement in how Lean professionals are treated in the workplace • Need to be a mind reader to know what bosses want • Found ways to avoid being depressed and move forward • Consist hypocrisy of leadership; supportive of Lean but support is withdrawn or restricted • You get stigmatized by asking questions
<h2>Other Comments</h2>			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “As a CI person, I feel out of place at work” • “Everyone says they want my skill set, but there is a constant reversion to classical management” • Leaders say go ahead and do that, and then I can’t deliver in full because of restrictions they place on me 			

Lean Professional #5 • 12 Years of Experience

Successes	Likes	Difficulties	Dislikes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Creating awareness and curiosity about the Lean tools” • Explaining Lean in simple terms, without the jargon • Producing financial and non-financial improvements • Create pull for the CI organization’s services, to simplify their processes at no cost to their department • [When we succeed] we are highly appreciated professionals in the organization 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “When I see the light bulb go off [and people get it]” • Ability to implement small changes that create huge efficiencies throughout the entire process • Simple ideas with big results • “Lean is really my passion” • People are surprised to learn the overall process [not just their part] • Working with different people and departments • “My job is never boring; it’s always interesting” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Limited baseline data for improvement • “Some people think Lean is project management” • Gaining buy-in from departments that don’t know about Lean; they are too busy and don’t see how the Lean office can help • Pull for the Lean department [to help] is better than us pushing • People think the Lean means doing more work with less people or that layoffs are coming • [When we get involved] they think the department is being blamed for poor performance • “Explaining the benefits of Lean to people” • Soft skills are very important, to convince people 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Frequent changes in CI department managers • “Following up with people to implement the action items” – they don’t want to own it; have to babysit them; wastes my time when I could be improving other processes • Confusion over CI role versus project management role • Scheduling people for kaizen; highly paid for doing administrative work • “Business unit management support is a struggle” • Been affected by three times by the threat of job elimination; “I lost my job two times” – once due merger and one due to a new CEO • [Often] my work is not tangible because it is not directly related to the product; we improve HR, legal, compliance, and marketing improve processes; the improvements do not drop to the P&L
<h2>Other Comments</h2>			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Leaders see our function as non-value added” • “Upper management does not know the value of Lean because they don’t know what Lean is” • I’m not finding new jobs that come close to the pay I earned in my prior job [from which I was let go] 			

Lean Professional #6 • 17 Years of Experience

Successes	Likes	Difficulties	Dislikes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Providing an outside perspective to help people solve problems • Breaking down silos, making people comfortable to work together • Making the pain go away • Understand the human component to engage people • Make people happy • Getting managers to recognize the power of A3 thinking to generate [favorable] outcomes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “People’s faces light up when they suddenly get it” • When people start doing Lean with [and especially] without me • “Planting the problem-solving seed” • “It’s more than just a job; you are actually changing lives” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Managers have another job; they see no value in huddle boards; a chore that does not produce results • Regular metrics are more important than Lean metrics • Success measured by number of huddle boards, number of A3s, etc., not results or outcomes • “The people I report to are focused on the Lean model for change and don’t understand Lean is outcome focused” • Our Lean department added work to other departments rather than helping people solve problems using the Lean tools • Vice president turnover • Lean promotes a type of classlessness which conflicts with hierarchies 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Not allowed to make changes in our Lean Department or even question things • Lean [department] managers would not admit or realize the model was failing and would not ask “Why?” • “Allowed to question anything other than what we do in the Lean department”; can’t question the Lean model, the dogma • [Lean office managers] did not use Lean to understand why the model did not work • “If I asked ‘Why?’ they would ostracize me. It created [a climate] of fear” • They [eventually] abandoned the Lean model – that’s OK • Leadership did not buy-in, but they kept the Lean department [until recently] • Leaders not at the gemba; sometimes refused to do their huddle boards
<h2>Other Comments</h2>			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “The higher up you go, the less leaders care about Lean” • [People said] “Why bother [with Lean], my boss does not care” • Very frustrating job; leaders did not participate in Lean 			

Lean Professional #7 • 15 Years of Experience

Successes	Likes	Difficulties	Dislikes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Still employed; have not moved around too much • Working with people on the shop floor; developing relationships • Positively affect people • Help people understand and practice Lean as part of their job • Designed a cell to increase sales • Doubled output of a cell 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Working with people on the shop floor • Facilitating improvement • Learning; not getting stale • Variation in the work • Learning • We like the work we do, but the bureaucracy kills you • "It is the pain you remember more [than what you like]" 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Instability of upper management • CI is at the whim of upper management • Hard to bet upper management to see the value of Lean transformation • Upper management thinks they know what you do and what the benefits are • Lack of recognition of the talent of CI people; listens more to consultant than internal CI professionals • VP of CI often a political appointment; do a stint in CI then move on; some lack CI training; they're not CI professionals • "Being a CI professional is a tough gig. It's a nomadic way of life. It [job instability] causes a lot of stress" • "CI People are a nice to have, not a need to have" 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "I don't like the way CI people are thought of as cheap; respect the work we do and pay us better" • CI work is a technical profession and should be compensated as such • "We have not done a good job of marketing ourselves as professionals" • The job is a grind • Easy to start CI activities, but hard to keep them going • People think all we do is apply some simple Lean tools; we do much more than 5S. We can work on big problems • Cultural change is not supported when there is a new VP or president every 2-3 years • CI people ask a lot of questions. "It's our nature and our business. It's what you pay us for, to find a better way" • "Executives don't like to be challenged or corrected. It's their privilege to be right"
<h2>Other Comments</h2>			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If you've got kids, you want job stability. • "If my daughter wanted to be a CI professional, I'd say no. You'll go further in other jobs. Get a finance degree" • "I'm looking to get out of CI world; not enough job stability or upward mobility. CI is not a pathway to senior levels" 			

Research Limitations

Small Sample Size U.S. Lean Professionals

Yet, Comments are Consistent With What I Have Heard Over Many Years From People Around the World and Consistent With My Own Experiences

Analysis

- CI Professionals are, or Considered by Others to Be, Engineers
 - Work Designers and Work Improvers (Work Being a Social Problem)
- Engineers are Change-Oriented; Want to Change Things for the Better; They Want to Improve Things in a Scientific, Objective, Fact-Based Way
- CIPs Feel a Deep Ethical Commitment to Shop and Office Workers, Their Employer, the Public Interest (Customers, Society, Environment), and the CI Profession Itself
- Conservative Business Leadership Runs Counter to Engineer's Way of Thinking and Working
 - Solutions to Business Problems Often Determined by Political or Aesthetic Considerations; Clash in Fundamental Ways of Thinking and Values (Generates Chronic Stress)
- Most CIPs are Forced to Subordinate Their Fundamental Ways of Thinking and Values to the Thinking and Values of Business Leaders
 - i.e., The Institution of Leadership and The System of Profound Privilege

Analysis

- CI Professionals Struggle to be Recognized as Professionals
 - No Professional Society Specifically for CIPs
- CIPs Clearly Struggle for Agency – “the capacity of individuals to have the power and resources to fulfill their potential”
- Some Conceive of Themselves as Independent Professionals with Specialized Knowledge, Others as Functionaries in Business Bureaucracies
 - All Must Straddle Both Science and Business (i.e., Material and Metaphysical Worlds)
- Conflict and Compromise Between Loyalty to Profession (Do What is Right) and Loyalty to Employer (Do What the Boss Says) – Generates Chronic Stress
- For Most CIPs, “Winning” is Both Difficult and Rare
 - Must Work Within Constraint of a Structural Defect (Until Business Thinking/Values Change)
 - Cycle: Business Serves Society → Business Serves Shareholder → Business Serves Society

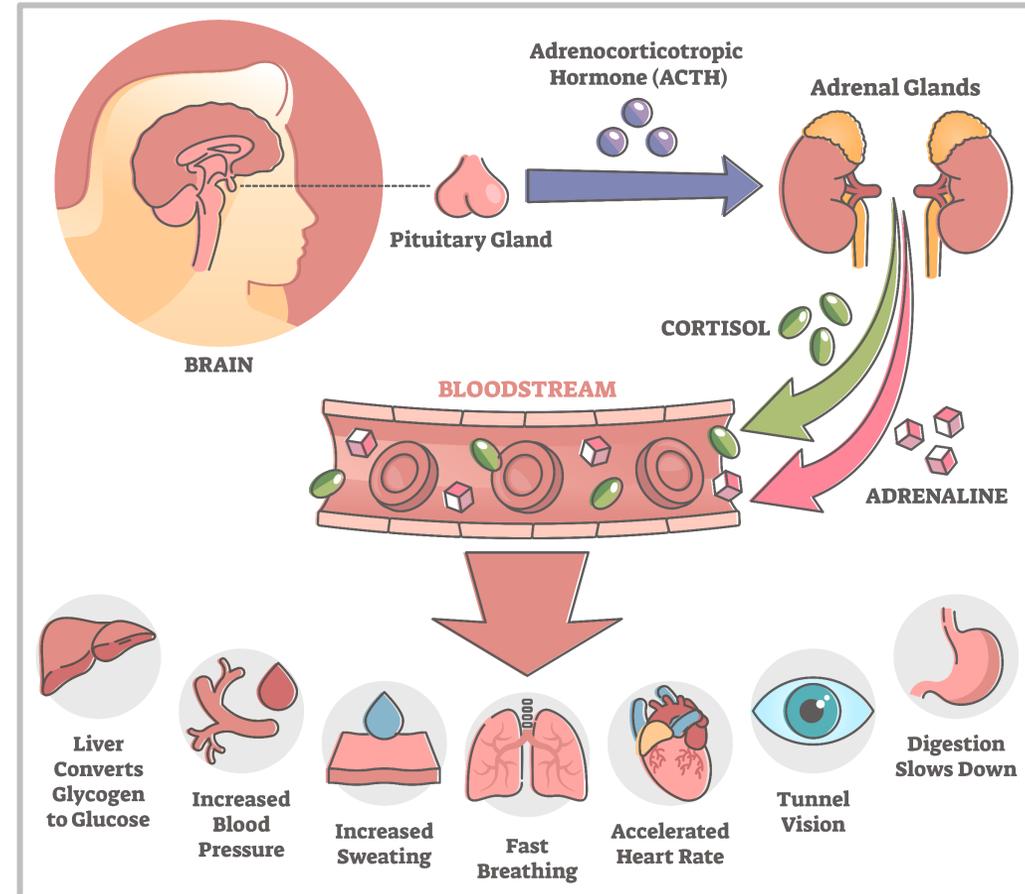
Analysis

“Difficulties” and “Dislikes” Potentially Concerning

Stress Response

Chronic Stress

Physically Unhealthy
Over the Long Term

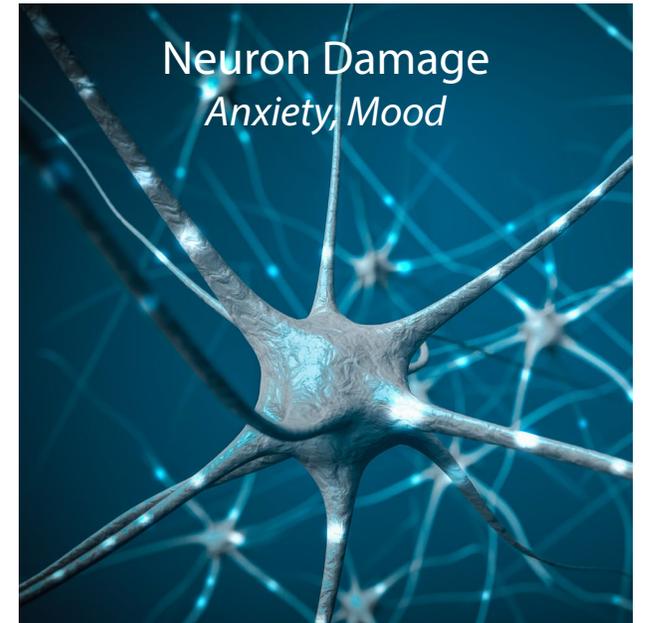
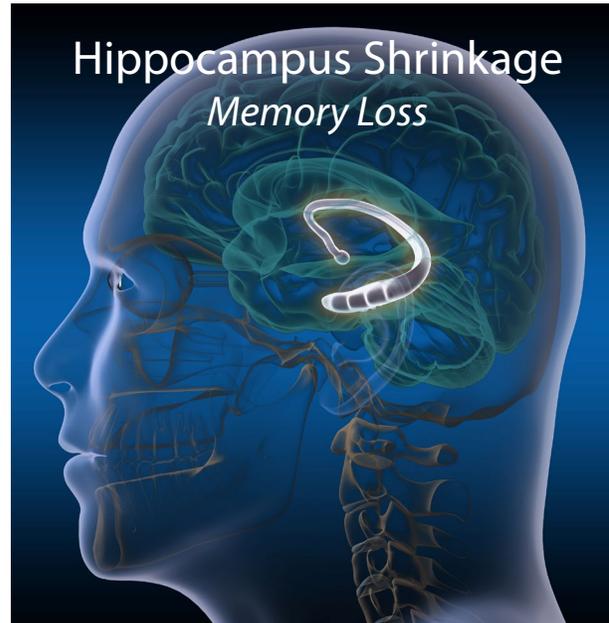


Analysis

“Difficulties” and “Dislikes” Potentially Concerning

Chronic Stress

Mentally Unhealthy
Over the Long Term



Analysis

Traditionally, Technology is Held Hostage to Culture

What is “Technology”

“how things are commonly done or made” and “what things are done or made”
“the application of scientific knowledge for practical purposes, especially in industry”

Taiichi Ohno Characterized the Toyota Production System as a New “Management Technology.”
The Word “Shingijutsu” Means “New Technology.”

Analysis

Traditionally, Technology is Held Hostage to Culture

What is “Culture”

“the customs, arts, social institutions, and achievements of a particular...social group”
“set of shared attitudes, values, goals, and practices that characterizes an institution”

Conflicting Social Groups / Institutions:
Business (Pecuniary, Status Quo) Culture
Lean (Customer Focus, Change) Culture

Analysis

Traditionally, Technology is Held Hostage to Culture

The Technology of Lean Management is Held Hostage to the Culture of Classical Management



Analysis

The Status-Driven Institution of Leadership and System of Profound Privilege Has Yet to See the Need for Lean Management



Key Takeaways

- Considering a Career as a Lean Professional? Be Aware of What You are Getting Into and What You are Up Against (Classical Management)
- CI Professionals Can Be, to Varying Extents, Company Decorations
 - “CI People are a nice to have, not a need to have”
 - Business Functions Sufficiently Well to Be Profitable Without CI Any People
- Value CIPs Want to Provide >> Value Company Wants to Receive
- CI Pros Need to Know More About Classical Management than Lean Management
 - Classical Management is the Lean Success Rate Limiting Function
- Entrenchment of Classical Management and Frequent Management Turnover Constantly Work Against CIPs and Lean Management Progress
- Lean Messes with Your Head (Demolish the Status Quo). So Does Classical Management (Accept the Status Quo). Chronic Stress a Concern for Both*

Key Takeaways

It Seems Whether You
Succeed or Struggle,
Lean Makes You a Little Bit Crazy

Taiichi Ohno

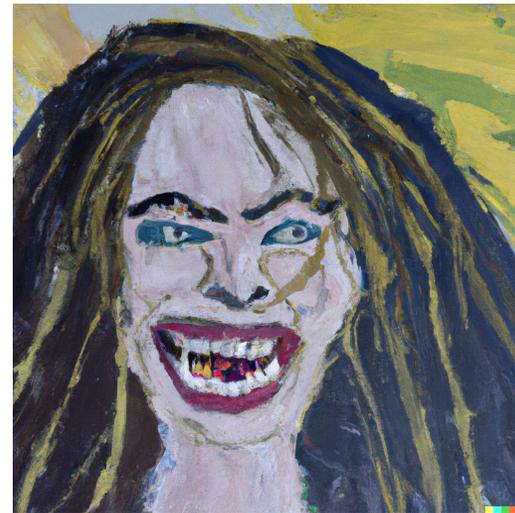
“When I...tried to implement it [TPS], everyone objected vehemently. To overcome resistance, I had to quarrel and fight. And since the numbers were against me, I had no choice – I went crazy.”

Lean Professionals 2, 4, 7

“It impacts your mental health”

“makes me question my sanity”

“led me to question myself”

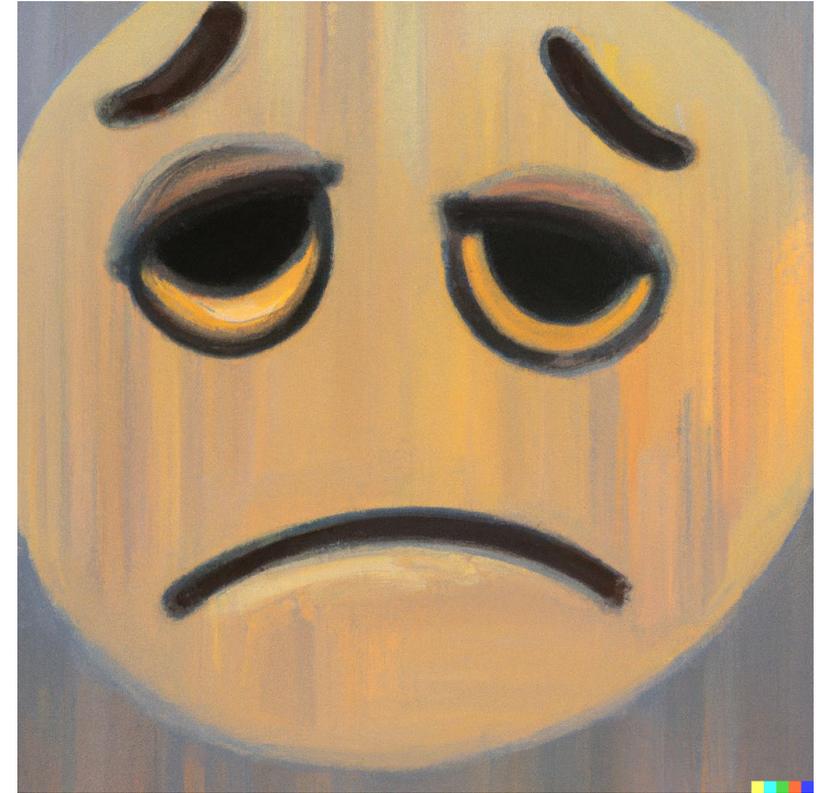


Important Questions

- What Can Be Done to Improve This Situation?
- How Can the CIPs' Role Become More Valued and Professionalized?
- How Should Lean Training & Education Change to Address These Common Problems?
- How Can the Deep Conflicts (Slides 13-20) Be Resolved?
- How Can Lean Professionals Be Better Supported (emotional perspective)?
- What Should Be the Career Paths for Lean Professionals?
- What Should Lean Professionals Do Differently?
- What Should Lean Movement Leaders Do Differently?
- What Should Top Company Leaders Do Differently?

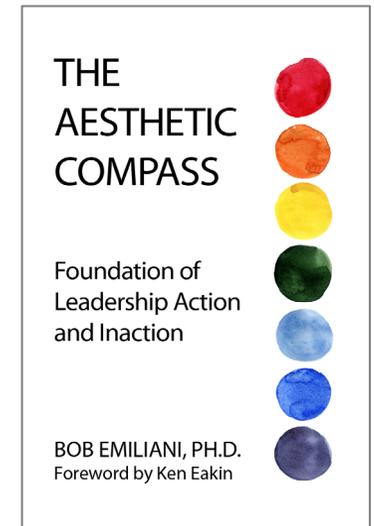
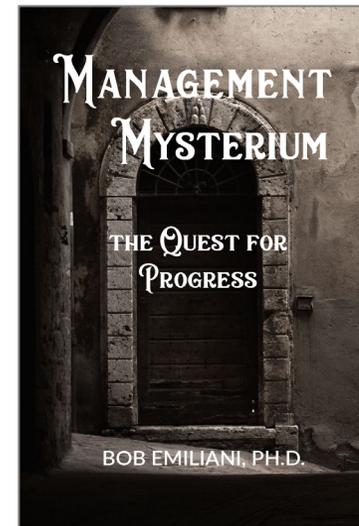
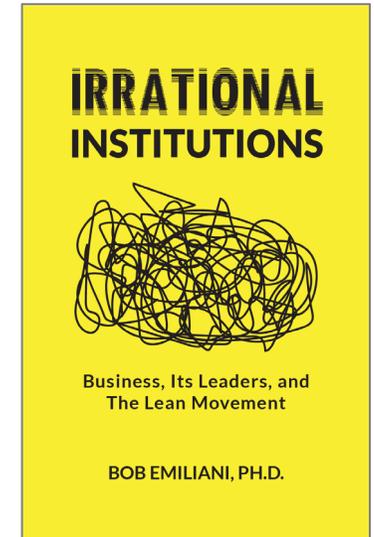
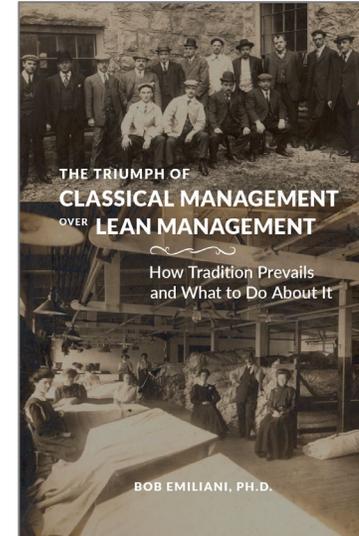
Personal Thoughts

- There is Frustration or Pain in People's Voices
- I Am Saddened by How Difficult It Has Been for Lean Professionals
- As Lean Promoters We Need to Ask Ourselves:
 - What is Our Responsibility to Lean Professionals?
 - Do We Respect People if We Allow Them to Suffer?
 - How Can We Help Lean Professionals Suffer Less?
- Awareness of These Chronic Problems Led Me to Keep Working to Figure Out What is Really Going On; Wrote Four Books to Help CI Pros Understand the Sources of Their "Difficulties" and "Dislikes"



Personal Thoughts

- My “Therapy” Was to Figure Out What Was Really Going On 
- Helped Me Feel a Lot Better. Please Try It! You’ll Feel Much Better Too.
- **This is Empathy, Not a Sales Pitch!**
- Unhappy that Lean Movement Leaders Have Long Been Indifferent to Lean Professionals’ Suffering
 - The Go-To Fix Will Likely Be More of the Same: Lean Success Stories! (Gaslighting)



What Do You Think?

Please Share Your
Thoughts

Direct Message Me
if You Prefer

Thank You for Viewing!

