

# LEAN IS NOT MEAN

## 68 Practical Lessons In Lean Leadership

**Bob Emiliani**

Author of *Practical Lean Leadership*



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68 Practical Lessons  
in Lean Leadership

Bob Emiliani

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# Lesson 45

## The Middle Manager Problem

It is common to hear senior managers say that the company's Lean transformation efforts were slowed due to resistance from middle managers. They usually attribute the resistance to Lean or a fear of change. Senior managers have perceived a problem (an effect) and identified two causes. Unfortunately, they have not identified the real problem and are guessing at the causes, which will surely lead to guessing solutions such as: "We don't have the right people in these key positions" or "We need new managers." These will not correct the problem.

If we look at this problem from middle managers' perspective, we would see more than just two causes that contribute to the problem perceived by senior managers. Middle managers would say:

- I don't understand Lean management.
- I don't know what to do.
- My boss does not support Lean.
- My boss does not practice Lean.
- Lean is for operations people; I'm not in operations.
- There are no rewards or recognition for doing Lean.
- Lean is just another demand placed upon me. It's a burden.
- There is nothing in it for me.
- I am afraid of losing my job.
- I fix things; continuous improvement is continuous re-work.
- I don't like rapid change.
- I am worried about failing and the consequences.
- Top management wants "flawless execution" and says "failure is not an option."

- I fear being blamed for bad outcomes.
- My job description has not changed.
- I don't have time for Lean.
- I keep forgetting what to do.
- My boss holds me accountable for results.
- My peers are not doing Lean and they still get rewarded.
- Annual performance appraisal criteria have not changed.
- Promotion criteria have not changed.
- I am held accountable to the same old metrics.

There is much more going on here than just resistance or fear of change. Lean transformations that go too slowly suffer from structural problems, not from a middle manager problem.

It is clear that the problem is an absence of problem-solving by senior managers. They must clarify the perceived problem because it is different from the actual problem(s). The actual problem correlates better with senior managers not having done the work necessary to set middle managers up to succeed.

Senior managers need to do an A3 report for this problem to understand root causes, and also to eliminate blame. If they did so, they would find numerous causes for the narrow effect that they perceive, and nearly every cause they find would require a corrective action – all of which would be relatively simple. Three things stand out with respect to slow Lean transformations:

- Senior management inconsistency.
- Lack of specificity regarding new roles, responsibilities, and daily activities.
- Poor understanding of Lean principles and practices by senior managers, which impedes their ability to explain and teach Lean management to middle managers.

In most Lean transformations, senior managers do not do the things they expect middle managers to do. Senior managers support Lean, but they do not act as role models by applying

Lean principles and practices to their own work and other work activities (by participating in kaizen). To say Lean is important and then personally do nothing says it all: “Lean is for lower-level people to do, not me.” It also says that Lean management is not that important. Senior managers willingly throw away a great opportunity to lead by example. This is an obvious leadership problem that must be corrected.

Senior managers must be explicit regarding what middle managers should do differently day-to-day. That means, in part, addenda to all job descriptions that include (as a starting point):

- Eliminate waste, unevenness, and unreasonableness.
- Use structured problem-solving tools (i.e. A3 and A4 reports).
- Create visual controls.
- Improve flow, then improve it again and again.
- Respect people: employees, suppliers, customer, investors, and communities.

Of course, senior managers must do these same things in their own work activities if they expect middle managers to do them in theirs. The expectation should be established that middle managers will describe these new activities at least weekly at the gemba (not in a conference room), and that senior managers will show evidence of their efforts to solve problems and improve processes to all employees (seeing, after all, is believing). Expectations, of course, must be followed up with concrete actions.

Senior managers must also be able to explain how Lean management makes middle manager’s job better and easier. If middle managers perceive Lean to make their job more difficult or worse, then one cannot expect them to embrace Lean management. Senior managers frequently pile requirements onto middle managers with no indication of what activities can be eliminated. This leaves middle managers to decide what is important and what is not important. In most cases, middle

managers will continue to do only what they are used to doing – especially if anti-Lean metrics remain in place.

What I have tried to illustrate here is that senior managers have a lot of work to do. They cannot simply proclaim the adoption of Lean management and then walk away from it or pretend to be interested during monthly reviews. Senior managers have to be part of it. They have to recognize that non-zero-sum (win-win) Lean is not a minor change to what they already know about people, work, organization, management, and leadership. It's back to school. If that is too big a challenge for them, then they should not adopt Lean management or find a different job.

## About the Author

M.L. “Bob” Emiliani is a professor in the School of Engineering, Science, and Technology at Connecticut State University in New Britain, Conn., where he teaches courses on Lean management and a unique course that analyzes failures in management decision-making.



Bob holds a bachelor’s degree in mechanical engineering from the University of Miami, a master’s degree in chemical engineering from the University of Rhode Island, and a Ph.D. degree in Engineering from Brown University.

He worked in the consumer products and aerospace industries for 15 years, beginning as a materials engineer. He has held management positions in engineering, manufacturing, and supply chain management, and had responsibility for implementing Lean in manufacturing and supply chains at Pratt & Whitney.

Bob joined academia in September 1999 at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute (Hartford, Connecticut campus) and worked there until 2004. He has applied Lean principles and practices to the courses he teaches since he joined academia, and led the first kaizens to improve an accredited master’s degree program in 2002-2003. He joined Connecticut State University in 2005.

Emiliani has authored or co-authored more than 20 books, four book chapters, over 35 peer-reviewed papers on Lean management and related topics, and 10 papers on materials science and engineering. He has received six awards for writing.

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