



## 10 Traits I Look for in a Lean Leader

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Having interviewed a few leaders in my day, and having the opportunity to work for some of the most well-respected lean companies in the world, one of the questions I get asked a great deal is, "Damon, we are trying to build a lean culture in our company...What traits should I look for in a Lean Leader, at every level?" Below is a list of the 10 traits I look for when hiring a Lean Leader:



**1. Spirit of Inquiry** - Leaders who possess this trait have an enduring curiosity and desire to know and understand how things in the world work. Often times, these individuals will "Google" the unanswered questions on their mind, at that moment, as they cannot accept the feeling of not knowing why things are the way they are.

- **Why this matters:** Rarely do these people accept the status quo. They are change agents who are never satisfied with unanswered questions standing in the way of their progress. They trust,

but verify. They will get their hands dirty and do the heavy lifting required to understand

the process deeply, allowing the organization to make better informed decisions and deliver better results.



2. **"And/Or" Thinkers** is the belief that *"it is possible to have your cake and eat it too."* From a very young age, we are told that in order to have something a certain way, we must make compromises. It requires an open mind and a belief that it is possible to achieve far more

without sacrificing any element of what is truly required.

- **Why this matters:** Organizations settle for far less than their full entitlement. As a company, it **IS** possible to be the lowest cost producer, with great quality, and exceptional lead-time. These individuals embrace this mindset fully, and in their effort to deliver results, never sub-optimize the process, or others in doing so.



3. **High Expectation Setters** - High expectation setters have cracked the code on delivering results. They have figured out that even if they fall short of the "stretch" target, they will be further ahead than everyone else who didn't set one. They also realize that it is important not to set arbitrary targets that are meaningless to the

organization, which can have the exact opposite effect.

- **Why this matters:** Organizations and individuals tend to rise to the level of expectations placed upon them, "good" or "bad". Completing stretch assignments and changing someone's belief of "what is truly possible" has huge implications on the level of effort that

they exert from that point forward, thus changing their mental picture of what is "achievable".



**4. *Extreme Ownership*** - When a team is malfunctioning, these individuals embrace the notion that there is no such thing as a "bad" team. They believe that they alone are responsible for the work the team puts forth. They shoulder the responsibility and don't look for ways to blame others for their own situation.

- **Why this matters:** Functional departments within a company must break down barriers, depend on each other and understand who depends on them. If they forgo the principle of extreme ownership, operate independently or work against each other, the results can be catastrophic to the overall company's performance.



**5. *Gemba Focused Problem Solvers*** -These leaders recognize the importance of the principle that in order to really understand a process, you have to go to the spot where the work is being done. The concept of gemba is part of a bigger philosophy known as the "3 Reals". You have to: 1) go to the real place 2) to

observe the real thing 3) to get the real facts and data.

- **Why this matters:** Companies make far too many business-critical decisions based solely on opinions, anecdotes, one-offs, someone's "years of experience," limited data or

information, flawed analysis, and autocratic directives. These leaders bring order to the chaos and will teach others to do the same.



**6. Sharpen the Saw** - (credited to the *"7 Habits of Highly Effective People"*)...They tend to be lifelong learners and maintain an active list of personal development opportunities, training events to attend, books to read, and places to visit. They can clearly articulate what their strengths and weaknesses are and can point to tangible actions they have in place at this moment to further their

development.

- **Why this matters:** Knowledge is power; more importantly knowledge transfer is power.

The organization that is fully able to harness the collective talent and abilities of its associates and share that in a deliberate, process-focused way, will outperform their competition...hands down.



**7. A "Giver", Not a "Taker"** - The "takers" are people who are trying to get as much as possible from people and contribute as little as they can in return, thinking that it is the shortest and most direct path to achieving their objectives. "Givers" are looking to help others by making an introduction, giving advice, mentoring or sharing knowledge, without any ulterior motives.

- **Why this matters:** Takers are toxic to your organization. They struggle to work in teams or collaborate cross-functionally in an effective manner. They tend to be the ones who do the least work, come ill-prepared to meetings, and fail to follow through on commitments. Over time, people lose respect for "takers" as they begin to uncover their selfish motivations for dominance, control, accolades, and monetary benefit.



**8. Strategic Thinkers** - Strategic thinkers have the ability to use the left (logical) and right (creative) sides of their brain. They can convert strategies into concrete action plan steps, with milestones, metrics, and contingencies. They monitor trends, make connections of unrelated data, and anticipate the next moves of the competition. They are

amazingly aware and perceptive, almost as if they can see around corners.

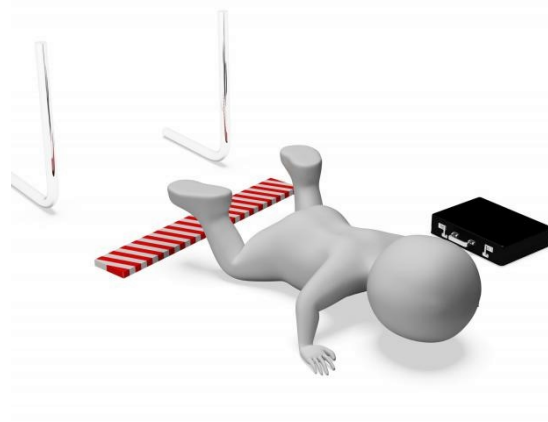
- **Why this matters:** Strategic thinkers help the organization to steer clear of "not invented here" syndrome. They're change catalysts, and inspire a bias for action in spite of everyone else's comfort level with staying exactly where they are. Their viewpoint of the marketplace, customers, competition, trends, and external drivers is a valuable lens to look through for companies looking to stay ahead. It gives them the advance opportunity to reinvent themselves at critical points in the business cycle.



**9. Talent Builders** - These leaders believe that the primary purpose of their role as a leader, is to develop new leaders. They have meaningful development discussions, set goals and objectives, track progress, provide resources and

encouragement, and take an active role in their team's career path, while aligning the critical needs of the organization.

- **Why this matters:** These individuals are almost always your "net exporters" of talent throughout the organization. Their commitment to developing the skills and knowledge of others, has a tremendous impact on the company's strategic objectives and ability to deliver consistent results over time.



decisions upon.

**10. Willingness to Try & Fail** - These leaders do not let perfect get in the way of better. They adopt the idea of "creativity vs. capital", and are willing to take calculated risks to make change happen. They view "failure" as part of the natural process of iterating towards their success. These past "failures" provide them with guideposts from which to make future

- **Why this matters:** The breadth of knowledge and experience that these individuals possess is highly valuable to the organization. They have essentially learned "how not" to do things and as a result can get you to the answer far more quickly. Their willingness to try new things is an asset for companies looking to make transformational change.

What traits do you look for in a Lean Leader?



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#### BACKGROUND

Damon is the President & CEO of Lean Focus. For over 20 years, he has been implementing lean in consulting, operations, continuous improvement, and GM & VP-level leadership roles for such companies as Danaher, HNI, Eaton, Argo Consulting, Experian, and Winegard.

Trained by disciples of the Toyota Production System, he worked in a Shingo Prize winning facility and is a Shingo Prize Examiner. Over his career he has demonstrated hands-on leadership and facilitation of 500+ kaizen events for 42 major corporations in 16 different countries. While at Danaher, one of his mentored operating companies was nominated Most Improved Plant, and one of his factories won Best Plant Worldwide 2 years in a row. Damon holds an MBA from St. Ambrose University and a Bachelors of Arts in Management and Marketing from Iowa Wesleyan University.

#### INDUSTRY EXPERIENCE

Aerospace and Defense, Automotive, Electronics, Capital Equipment, Chemicals, Protective Packaging, Residential Construction Materials, Water Quality, Dental, Test & Measurement, Sheet Metal Fabrication, Life Sciences, Medical Devices, Discrete Assembly, Oil and Gas.

#### LEAN EXPERIENCE

Building/Installing Problem Solving & Kaizen Cultures, Operational Due Diligence, Acquisition Integration, Strategic Planning & Policy Deployment, Sales Force Efficiency & Effectiveness Tools, Pricing Margin Analysis, Transactional Kaizen, EBITDA focused operational improvements, Cellular Manufacturing, 6S & Visual Management, Standardized Work, Mistake Proofing (Poka Yoke), Visual Controls, Setup Reduction (SMED), Total Productive Maintenance (TPM), Daily Management Processes, Leader Standard Work, Working Capital reduction via Kanban & Pull Based Inventory tools, DSO Reduction, and Accounts Payable processes, Value Analysis & Engineering, 3P, Accelerated Product Development Tools.