

# Lean Focus



## 4 Key Roles: Building a House on Your Lean Journey

By Damon Baker

Any company that decides to go on the lean journey towards continuous improvement must know the respective functions all its stakeholders should play to be successful. Indeed, going lean is a daunting endeavor that requires persistence, patience, accountability, know-how, and grit.

Going lean requires that all stakeholders learn a new language and how it pertains to their specific roles within the context of the company's overall vision and mission. A full lean transformation is no easy task and is always a work in progress.

Once implemented, a lean business system can greatly accelerate a company's growth. Therefore, CEOs have an urgent responsibility to understand both lean in theory and practice at all levels. The simple metaphor of a house takes what can, in fact, appear like a nine-headed

hydra, transforming a “terrifying” monster into something far easier to understand and put into motion during the never-ending lean journey. To successfully implement and transform a company with a lean business system, there are four key roles that need to be fully understood, otherwise you run the risk of not realizing its true potential.

## **1. The Role of the Architect**

Every house requires an architect or a team of architects. These professionals have the know-how and experience—the toolbox—to design a house using little more than specialized computer software. They draw the sketches, design blueprints, comply with the local regulatory and/or ordinance framework, acquire building permits, and adapt to the “lay of the land”. Of course, not every house has the same building environment and requirements. Architects must also be flexible and interact with builders, tradespeople, as well as prospective homeowners.

The architects, then, are the lean experts—the consulting firms and other lean professionals who know the ropes of a lean business system and how to implement company-wide changes per its unique requirements. They know that one size does not fit all and change their blueprints accordingly.

## **2. The Role of the Builder**

Of course, no house construction would be complete without the builders. In a company, a continuous improvement leader may be likened to a “builder”. They receive the blueprints, interpret them, and build the house per its distinctive specs. Without them, the architects’ vision could never be realized. While the builders utilize specific tools and processes to get the home building project off the ground and running, they do not question the overall methodology—what it takes to translate the blueprint into something that will be both livable and lasting. In many respects, their scope is somewhat limited by their lack of experience in seeing and implementing the entirety of the lean business system.

## **3. The Role of Tradespeople**

Every house also needs skilled tradespeople—the specialists who lay the foundation, frame, plaster, wire, plumb, roof, and paint the structure. It is impossible to imagine a house constructed without them, a company without their acumen. Consistent with the metaphor, they are the lean practitioners within a company, or specialists in tools. They do not question the protocols needed during the lean journey. However, as specialists, they only see a small part of the whole. Nonetheless, they do all they can to optimize their roles and responsibilities within given parameters.

With tradespeople, a company’s lean transformation is one step closer to becoming a finished house. That house is an efficiently-run company with a tangible continuous improvement culture that bears the fruit of its overarching vision and mission—improving profitability while eliminating wasteful, redundant processes.

## 4. The Role of the Homeowner

Finally, the homeowners are ready to move in. They can be viewed as the everyday employees and/or users who usually have little or no idea how the house was designed and constructed. They may be oblivious to all of the interdependent processes and procedures involved. Most likely, they had little or no input related to the project or the thought that went into it. Nonetheless, workers are vital components of any company. They are also prized for their functional expertise and their ability to continually enhance, and/or improve their work processes. As the homeowners, they are responsible for keeping the house clean, well-maintained, and livable i.e. caring for and looking after the lean business system.

Finally, it is the homeowners who are integral in making a house into a home. Imagine walking through a manufacturing plant or an office without seeing any workers. They are the glue of a company dedicated to a culture of continuous improvement.

### Why does this matter?

Unfortunately, many CEOs may demand an “expert” with little or no architectural experience, i.e. lean expertise. All too often, they hire an expert from a well-established company who has the *wrong* kind of expertise. Instead of an architect, a CEO may make a key hiring mistake—acquiring a tradesperson rather than the desired architect. For example, a desperate CEO wants a company-wide lean transformation to be completed from soup to nuts by the coveted “ACME Business System” expert. Uninformed and rushed, they hire someone with no home architecture or building experience whatsoever. Organizations should do their due diligence and understand the person who they are bringing in as an individual completely separate of the organization from which they came.

The experience can be just as trying for the new building contractor who, lacking the required experience, ultimately gets fired for being mis-hired in the first place. “I can’t help you implement a company-wide change of this magnitude...I don’t have that kind of expertise,” is a common refrain. As a result, the vision of a completed house is never realized. Thus, the soup is never served and dessert does not follow.

At the other end of the spectrum, as the user of a system (the house), (homeowners) everyday workers simply do not have the necessary training and exposure to a business system that stresses lean practices at every step of the way as well as in every function of its interdependent departments. It is absolutely necessary that all employees and end-users have at least a rudimentary understanding of what kind of business system keeps their house functioning harmoniously—what models and practices make their house a functional home. When a homeowner is foisted into the role of living exclusively in the living room, they may, in time, forget that they live in a spacious home. Similarly, a company has the responsibility of training all its employees at least the basics of its lean business system. One cannot assume they will figure out how (the house) works on their own, without a guided tour.

When a company’s CEO hires someone to build its house, it is vital to understand which person they are hiring to get the job done. Are they getting an architect, builder, tradesperson, or user

(home owner)? By hiring an architect, a company can be fairly confident that it is getting an experienced homebuilder, an individual or team whose expertise and values are aligned with the goals of the desired lean business system. By creating a fundamental, company-wide awareness and understanding of who should do what and when, CEOs are ensuring that their homes are well-constructed, livable structures that last into perpetuity.

"Whatever good things we build end up building us." - Jim Rohn

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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. Damon led the North American Danaher Business System Office. 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.