

Lean Focus



How to Spot a Lean Impostor

By Damon Baker

During more than two decades of experience helping companies in install lean principles and practices, I have observed a plethora of dedicated organizations successfully use lean to transform their culture and deliver industry-leading value creation for shareholders and employees alike. Indeed, the lean journey is not for the faint of heart. Authentic organizations that use goal-oriented lean as part of their everyday operations are characterized by their grit and tenacity—a sort of “sticktuitiveness” that permeates their leadership and company culture. On the other hand, I have also encountered more than a few orgs—from small to large—that despite their “efforts” fall woefully short of hitting the mark. I prefer to call many of these companies “lean impostors”. Here are ten common traits that will help you spot them:

- 1. They Care More About Looking Good than Doing Good:** While this may seem like a no-brainer and a practice to steer clear of, many companies are guilty of this behavior. For instance, the C-suite (and above) at such companies is usually rife with back-patting and gleeful proclamations of success. While they are lightning quick to point out their “successes” or what they are doing that is “good”, they overlook ongoing setbacks and obstacles. The truth is that no lean journey is complete without them. Moreover, a “We’re the best!”

mindset breeds complacency. Of course, while the company boasts of its lean successes and overlooks its challenges, its competitors are waiting to pounce on them.

2. They Are Already Doing Everything... "Good": Companies that are already doing everything well do not see the need to improve. Akin to Point 1, these orgs may come across as self-satisfied, or even smug. Once, at a large plant on the East Coast, I sat down with a company president and his team. When I asked the team where they saw opportunities to improve, the answer was unanimous: “We are already doing ‘good’, we are already doing what we were asked to be doing.” In reality, they were not doing “good” at all, in spite of their seeming “commitment” to lean. On-time delivery to the customer was horrendous, quality rejects lined the walls, and the warehouse was bursting at the seams with unnecessary inventory. The list goes on and on...The bottom line: they were not doing “good” because, from their limited perspective, they did not know what “good” looked like. They had only become mired in complacency.

3. Slogans, Posters, and Assessments: Sure, it is nice for companies to have slogans to rally around when things are bad or good. Posters can help to remind employees and ensure important points are well understood by all, while assessments can help teams identify organizational gaps and key priorities. However, many companies, in lieu of actual change, will use these tools superficially, believing they somehow have improved a process or changed behaviors. They may endlessly roll out new programs or initiatives to keep teams busy, rather than focus on key activities that create actual value for the company. These companies need to dig deeper and figure out if their business is driving the desired results, otherwise we wind up with “lean wallpaper”.

4. Masters of Vanity Metrics: So, by years end, you have run 75 kaizens and trained 300 people. Impressive numbers. However, such proxy metrics measure activities--not results. Companies need to get down to the nitty-gritty underlying value creation to figure out where and when to pull the right levers to drive a successful lean and cultural transformation. Anything less is done to merely look good.

5. They Get Lost on Their Way to Gemba: Getting lost on the way to Gemba is a sign of dissociation—a disconnect between upper, middle, and hourly employees. Going to Gemba can even be an embarrassing task for a lot of upper management. They may perceive problem-solving on the factory floor as being beneath them, or they may not even know where Gemba is located. Locked away in their office, throne, or ivory tower, problem-solving at Gemba may be a foreign concept to them. When confronted with a problem, gather the facts and go to where the real work happens.

6. Pomp and Circumstance: Much like spiking the football on the one-yard line, pomp and circumstance is when everything--every initiative or “victory” is constantly rolled out to executive fanfare and hubbub with little actual results. Sadly, companies awash in the glory of pomp and circumstance talk more than they do. Their “say/do” ratio is completely misaligned. These mismanaged companies need to stop and hold themselves accountable for their results. Just as the Navy SEALs stress *extreme* ownership, orgs that devote time and other resources to

self-aggrandizement must get back to the basics of accountability—not just lip service. They must follow through on verbal commitments with measurable, goal-directed actions. We should be happy with the progress we are making, but never satisfied with where we are...no problem = big problem.

7. Dull-Eyed Stare: Often, I find myself in situations where it is obvious that the competitive fire has left employees. No one cares about new ideas any longer, because no one listens and nothing gets done. The twinkle in their eyes is gone. Often, this is a leadership failure due to their inability to engage all levels of the organization, failing to give them an opportunity to learn and grow. A lack of trust in leadership is usually the root cause. It takes a lot of effort to rekindle enthusiasm and involve employees in improving their work. Some dull-eyed employees may have already graduated to a phase of total resignation or, in classic passive-aggressive fashion, buck the system altogether.

8. Lean...It's A Manufacturing Thing: Sometimes, the leader(s) of an organization mistakenly believe that lean is only a manufacturing initiative. In fact, lean applies to every facet of an organization's operations—sales, marketing, R&D, etc. You are only as strong as the weakest link in your organization..A manufacturing-centric approach to lean leads to missed opportunities to truly impact the total customer experience. Lean at its' core is about creating continuous flow...doing more, faster, better, with less. What department wouldn't benefit from that?

9. Belts, Belts, and More Belts: Sometimes, management gets caught up in the game of acquiring more belts (certifications) at the expense of genuine change. The journey of continuous improvement suffers as a result of using signifiers of “expertise” rather than using them to fundamentally change the business. When an org has employees who are forced to wait for the “expert” with the belt to solve a problem because they are not "certified", problems persist, our people lose hope, and we create an environment of elitism. One of the worst wastes of all is the underutilization of people's talent, skills, and knowledge.

10. Champions of the Gut Feel: Approaching key decision-makers with hard data and facts only to be rebuffed with blanket statements such as “I know, I feel, I think” is discouraging. Leaders who rely solely on their intuition tend to make an overwhelming majority of their decisions based on experience, assumptions, and unproven suppositions—so-called “gut feelings”. Without concrete data to support logical problem-solving, both formal and informal opinion leaders unwittingly lead everyone over a cliff.

Despite the prevalence of lean impostors, mindsets and behaviors can and do change. It takes time and patience when deeply-ingrained behaviors become unnoticed and unquestioned. Nevertheless, I have seen organizations turn around and show positive change on their lean journey. Continuous improvement is a lifetime commitment, and all levels and departments within an organization must be aligned and on-board to initiate a lasting transformation.

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BACKGROUND
Damon is the President & CEO of Lean Focus. For over 25 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 50 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.

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