



HPS Guest Article ... Who's Your Customer?

By Bob Adams
Managing Director
Okanagan Lean Enterprise Consortium

Lean is built on the principle of simplicity. The more simple the process the more people you can include in improving it. Anyone who has been through a workshop on 5S, Value Stream Mapping, Cellular Manufacturing, Kanban or Quick Change, will tell you that this is not "Rocket Science". Why then, do 85% of companies trying to implement Lean, fail?

It is not a failure of the tools. I believe it is a failure of the management and employees to take a fundamentally different look at the way they work "internally".

Over the past century, North American manufacturers have progressed from supplying customers with what they think they wanted, to supplying customers with what they said they wanted, to helping customers determine what they really need to be successful and helping them get it. We have learned to communicate with our customers in a positive, progressive way, so that problems are anticipated and success is assured. Unfortunately, the same progress cannot be seen internally within our organizations.

Everyone within an organization has internal customers and suppliers. Stop reading this article for a moment, close your eyes and think; whom, in your organization, do you supply a product, information or a service to? When was the last time you asked them, as your customer, if they were happy with you as a supplier? If they could outsource what you do for them, would they? Now think about the people who supply a product, information or a service to you. How often have you accepted something that wasn't what you wanted, was more than you wanted, had errors, was late and caused you extra work? Have you ever gone to that person, your supplier, to explain what you really need from them to be successful in your job?

The failure of management and employees to recognize these internal customer/supplier relationships, results in the building of invisible walls, between and within departments. These walls impede communication, interrupt product / information flow and destroy moral. The culture develops into one of a "hand grenade over the wall".

Imagine how effective your organization would be if you dealt with your internal customers with the same respect and concern for success, as you do your **#1** external customer. Imagine how much more effective you could be in your job if you received exactly what you need, error free, when you need it, all the time.

Start today. Make some jaws drop. Identify your internal customers. Go to them and ask them how you could make them more successful in their job. Record your customer's agreed to requirements and keep them updated through regular communication. This will also assist people filling in for you and enable them to be as reliable an internal supplier as you have become. An organization that recognizes and develops internal customer/supplier relationships, will be an organization of proactive, clear communicators, focused on success.