



The Powerful Link to Sustaining Lean-Six Sigma Gains

By Gail Snyder

When Mike McCarthy, author and Lean facilitator, recently published his book *Sustain Your Gains* (2011, Performance Management Publications), John Kaemmerlen, Lecturer at the Rochester Institute of Technology (RIT), was very pleased with the book's content and title. "I think *Sustain Your Gains* is perfect because it focuses on the key outcome that so many companies struggle with—how to keep the process and the gains going," says Kaemmerlen. The title also alludes to statistics that a high

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percentage of Lean-Six Sigma initiatives eventually falter or fail. The book’s subtitle refers to the element Kaemmerlen believes is both the cause and the solution for much of that failure—The People Side of Lean-Six Sigma. “So many people are struggling to keep these initiatives going,” he says. “It really comes back to Aubrey Daniels’ statement that leaders have to start with themselves.”

In fact, according to a white paper by Group-Computer Solutions, a recent survey published on isixsigma.com revealed that “60% of respondents cited ‘lack of sustained executive sponsorship and commitment’ as a key factor in why Six Sigma projects fall short of expectations and 58% pointed to ‘lack of buy-in from front-line managers and employees for implementing and sustaining results on Six Sigma project solutions.’” *Sustain Your Gains* not only acknowledges but also addresses the critical missing component in most Lean-Six Sigma efforts—the use of behavioral science to motivate the workforce at every level.

“It baffles me that so many smart people don’t understand the power and necessity of positive reinforcement for both behaviors and results. Doing only one or the other is insufficient,” says Kaemmerlen. “Some lead-



ers have the idea if you do extrinsic positive reinforcement, you’ll create a culture where people never develop internal motivation. Those leaders don’t understand the execution elements of the proper mix of social and tangible reinforcers, and the different reinforcement schedules. They probably aren’t differentiating, ‘Okay, this guy is obviously highly internally motivated, so I

need to be on one schedule with him. This other person has only been on the floor for two weeks, so I need to be on a different schedule with that person.’ That kind of structure, I’m pretty sure, is very rare in any organization,” Kaemmerlen explains. “In the book, McCarthy talks about gradually thinning the reinforcement schedule, which obviously is exactly right. Also, the information regarding thinning reinforcement is presented in a way that is easy to understand.”

Kaemmerlen should know. His career includes 31 years with Kodak in multiple capacities: industrial engineering, manufacturing, logistics, Lean project leadership, and department management. His classes at RIT serve a mix of undergraduate, graduate, and co-op students via a shop-floor Lean course on the tools and uses of Lean, and a Lean enterprise system course (including value-stream mapping at the supply chain level and Lean production control.) However, Kaemmerlen, like McCarthy, adds to his instruction a behavioral component not usually offered in a typical Industrial and Systems Engineering environment. He’s discovered that although many of his students come to the classroom with extensive work experience, few indicate they understand the importance of building



John Kaemmerlen
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feedback and positive reinforcement into the Lean-Six Sigma process. “Even the exemplar systems don’t overtly plan for the delivery of positive reinforcement,” he says. “In such cultures, intrinsic reinforcement may develop in some people, but the leaders don’t really plan for positive reinforcement.”

As Kaemmerlen points out, a Lean-Six Sigma system where positive reinforcement exists but is not planned or delivered in a systematic way, can result in **extinction** and burn-out for even the best of performers. Then, when Lean-Six Sigma gains begin to diminish, everyone is puzzled. In almost every case the problem lies with behavior, often at all levels of the organization. “Somebody told me once that you can divide people into thirds. There’s the third that want to try the new stuff, the third that resist the new stuff, and the third in the middle that watches to see which of those other two groups is going to win, and then they’re going to go that way,” Kaemmerlen states. “Lean-Six Sigma gains usually don’t stick because the leadership behaviors needed to support those gains aren’t there. Starting it is easy, but keeping it going is difficult because there aren’t enough leaders that internalize the concepts and that are willing to go out and engage in behaviors totally different than those they are used to. That includes going to Gemba, doing confirmation checks in Gemba, and when you find the right behaviors delivering contingent positive reinforcement.”

He then shares two anecdotes. One describes a Toyota manager who, if he arrives to work even two minutes early, stands in the lobby until it is the exact time to go to work. On first glance, this may

seem ridiculous, but in actuality, the manager has internalized the principles of Lean. “What’s wrong with starting two minutes early? Well, on the production floor we don’t let people start two minutes early, because it interferes with standard work. This leader gets it, in that he is applying the same principle to his own behavior,” says Kaemmerlen.

The second anecdote relates a lesson Kaemmerlen learned when he managed a department at Kodak. His comment to employees had always been, “If you walk by a piece of trash and don’t pick it up, you might as well have thrown that trash on the floor.” One day when Kaemmerlen noticed bits of film debris on the production floor, he picked up a broom and began sweeping. As he was doing so, a woman walked up to him and asked to shake his hand, saying, “I’ve been here for 25 years and this is the first time I’ve ever seen a manager sweep the floor.”

“That’s just a small example of how folks are paying attention to what leaders do and don’t do,” Kaemmerlen comments. “That woman recognized what all of the smart people on the production floor recognize, which is we gotta walk the talk.

“So many of us who are leaders think that our intuition is sufficient, that our 30 years of experience is sufficient. I don’t need checklists; I don’t need process. And that is all wrong. If you want a high-performance production system that’s based on the principles of Lean, you have to operate your own high-performance production system that’s based on the principles of Lean. Similarly, if you want your first-line supervisors to positively reinforce desired behaviors, you have to reinforce desired behaviors, including and especially the behaviors of those supervisors.”



One of Kaemmerlen's roles at RIT is that of Associate Director of the Toyota Production Systems Lab. Therefore, he knows the many facets of running a top-of-the-line Lean-Six Sigma operation. There, and in his lectures, he persistently makes the same point. "I say to people over and over again that extinction works," he says. "When you start ignoring the behaviors that you want in *any* arena, those behaviors are, over time, going to disappear. No matter how internally motivated you are or think you are, if you don't occasionally get some sort of attention from somebody for what you're doing, that behavior is going to drift away in many, many cases. So leaders, go to Gemba not just to find mistakes and fix them, but to catch people in the act of doing something right. Then do something about it."

"The phrase 'high-and-steady rate' of behavior is used in applied behavior analysis to describe the results achieved by systematic positive reinforcement. The 'steady' part is analogous to 'adherence to standard work' in Lean, and low variability in Six Sigma."

–Mike McCarthy

"When we misunderstand the causes of behavior, we waste our efforts working on the wrong causes, and then when it doesn't work, we often do the same thing harder. This is leadership rework, and it is muda (Japanese for waste)."

–Mike McCarthy

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[About the Author]

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Gail Snyder is a staff writer for Aubrey Daniels International. For the past 27 years, she has worked with clients to share their stories of the impact the science of behavior has had on their people and their business. In addition, Gail was the editor of Performance Management Magazine from 1987 to 2004.

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