

Lean Teamwork: how a team got to perform at top level

An article by Barry Pappot (CCHL)

Can teamwork really make the difference? In 2018 a business unit within a Dutch insurance service provider reached their best performance ever. Performing at the top level in the industry. This was done just within 3 months without any process or IT changes. In this article I describe what we did.

The start of a Lean journey

In 2018 I coached two managers responsible for a business unit. Our goal was to create a Lean organization. The first step of our Lean journey was to focus heavily on teamwork, within teams and between teams. Within several weeks we measured a considerable increase in productivity. We even achieved the highest level of productivity ever and after three months any remaining backlogs were reduced to an absolute minimum, enabling the organization to respond to all customer requests within 24 hours. A performance only matched by the best in the industry.

Many small companies within a company

To facilitate teamwork we implemented many small teams, like many small companies within a company. Each team being entirely responsible for servicing their clients. From start to finish. Each team having its own goals for delivery and customer satisfaction. But also for subjects like forecasting and profit.

Each team as a whole being responsible. No longer every man for himself. Team members who finished their allocated tasks assisted colleagues who happen to have had more time-consuming customer contacts that day. When a colleague had difficulties doing a task, other team members immediately stepped in to provide coaching. Ensuring that all team members were comfortable with providing excellent service to their customers.



Seeing problems

The managers played a crucial role during the implementation. Rather than directing, the manager had to ensure that the teams were enabled to service customers in a logical environment. Clarity and simplicity were crucial. This was achieved through clear working agreements, a standard work order and visualizing information.

Visualizing targets, progress and the work order helped us create an environment in which everything was transparent. When being on the office floor, going to gemba, you got an immediate insight in the progress of each team. This made it much easier to locate problems. Which team wasn't able to achieve its targets? This made it possible for us to focus only on the teams needed and create tailor made solutions for those teams. Instead of implementing changes for all teams, while many teams were not having problems. Important: implementing changes while there is no need creates an unstable performance, which leads to problems and more waste.



The Lean manager

In addition to creating a logical environment, the manager had to stimulate cooperation and ownership. They no longer told team members what to do: team members decided for themselves. Problems were no longer solved by management only, but also by team members themselves. For this the manager had to transfer more and more deep thinking to the team. We wanted the teams to propose how they wanted to solve a problem; the manager only approved the realization.



Obviously we helped the team members to obtain the skills needed to solve problems. We did not leave them to fend for themselves. This required training and intensive coaching. Changing the manager's role to trainer and coach as this became their primary responsibility.

For some teams the step towards intensive teamwork was easy; other teams needed more time. I noticed that in general teams grow to improved cooperation and more autonomy in phases¹. This is a continuous process, which restarts now and then as a result of a change in membership. It was the manager's role to support this growth and intervene in case of a conflict within the team.

¹ By which I do not refer to Tuckman's phases, but phases in teamwork:

- from sharing
- to assisting
- to agreeing
- to learning from each other
- to solving problems together

Ultimately we aimed for ever increasing teamwork and problem-solving skills within the teams. This wasn't easy. Managers were, therefore, coached themselves to master this new way of Lean managing.

Important: This way of managing must suit the person. There's no room for being bossy and one must be open to learn a lot.

Focus on primary services

Providing services through multiple smaller teams, i.e. smaller companies, means the organization became less complex. This made it easier to make plans for the next step. We wanted everything in the organization to support the teams, starting with the management layers. But we also wanted support departments be geared to assist the primary operations with knowledge, simple processes and platforms. As much as possible, we wanted the realization to be transferred to the teams – close to where the services are provided.



A strong combination

The working method that I have described is based on the Lean Workcell concept. I have implemented this concept in multiple organizations. However, the results achieved within the insurance industry seem to indicate a perfect match. I do believe this is attributable to the combination of the concepts Lean Work Cell and Basic Stability. Basic Stability means striving for a stable operation to create the foundation based on which services can be improved. Also see: [link](#).

About the author



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