

Bill Bellows - Utopia: Next Stop or Last Stop?

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Exploring the place of lean in government services

Organisations and interviews featured in this edition include: Commonwealth Bank of Australia, Care Quality Commission, TriHealth, Newsprinters UK, Academi Wales, Joe Bell, Bill Bellows, Valeocon Management Consulting and Nycomed.

IN THIS ISSUE:

Spreading the word: LMJ visits Newsprinters UK, the Scottish printing presses recently awarded the Shingo Prize.

Sharing the caring: The Care Quality Commission (CQC) is the independent regulator of health and social care in England; they talk to LMJ about their lean practices.

Wales: the land of the lean: We interview the head of continuous improvement and change at Academi Wales, to see how you go about the mammoth task of leaning an entire country.



Out of the blue: Utopia: Next step or last stop?

These articles present concepts to the LMJ community which might appear to be “out of the clear blue sky,” yet could be valuable to lean practitioners.

This issue we tackle that tricky concept of Perfection.

Sir Thomas More was not the first person, nor the last, to disagree with King Henry VIII. His last serious conflict, refusing to attend the coronation of Anne Boleyn as the Queen of England in 1533, was interpreted as a snub against Anne. From this episode, More’s enemies organised efforts to arrest him on charges of treason, ending two years later with his beheading. A tragic ending for the MP and author; who, nineteen years earlier, described the fictional island republic of Utopia. Common explanations suggest this landmass in the Atlantic Ocean represented a perfected society, one ultimately unreachable. 500 years later, visions of Utopia live on in our imaginations. But, what can be said of the enduring concept of perfection?

I have often entered a DIY shop in search of a specific tool or piece of hardware, not knowing where to find it and sought out assistance from a staff member. With their guidance through the aisles, the interaction inevitably ends with the question, “Is this what you are

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looking for?” and my reply, “Perfect!” In other words, “exactly what I had in mind.” Such an explanation of perfect differs fundamentally from a definition of perfect as an unreachable endpoint. That is, in terms of a product or a service, there will never be a better one. While I acknowledge my use of “perfect” to respond to questions such as “Is this what you are looking for?,” I have serious doubts about the use of perfect in the context of an ultimate achievement, perhaps characterised by “The Pursuit of Perfection,” a phrase often attributed to Toyota’s Lexus division.

As with Utopia, the concept of perfection as a pinnacle of performance is hardly limited to Toyota. Dudley Moore came to fame in the United

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States in the 1970s with the film *10*, a romcom in which he was paired with American actress Bo Derek, the perfect woman, a “10” on a scale of 1 to 10, if not 0 to 10. What matters is this scale, with a parallel to an Olympic judging system of 1 to 10, ends with 10 as the highest possible achievement in beauty as well as athleticism. What are the implications of a measurement scale that terminates abruptly? What can be said of the continuous pursuit of perfection, if perfection represents an endpoint, such as Bo Derek? While exploring a generation before models Gisele Bündchen and Naomi Campbell graced the covers of *Vogue* magazine, would it be possible for Dudley Moore’s character to find someone more beautiful than a 10? Can an organisation practice continuous improvement and simultaneously believe in perfection in this context? Does CI stop at perfection? On several occasions, I have heard the logic “continuous improvement is a journey” and “perfection is a very distant goal,” well in keeping with Thomas More’s Utopia. A distant goal, agreed, but also a point of stoppage that conflicts with my understanding of continuous, quite often defined as “happening or continuing without break or interruption.”

In a similar manner, I am reminded of the time I was once interviewed by a recruitment agency to offer a recommendation for a colleague. Each question, I was asked to rate my colleague on a scale of 1 to 10, with 10 being the highest. With replies ranging from 6 to 9, I reminded the interviewer that my answer, whether 6, 7, 8, or 9, was associated with a scale of 1 to 10, in which an 11 does not exist. It goes without saying 10.001 is also an impossible achievement. At one point I was asked by the interviewer if I was a philosopher, perhaps an indication my attempt at clarification was needlessly theoretical. I offered I was a student of the philosophy of continuous improvement and was puzzled by a scale that did not allow the performance of a system, a product, a process, if not a person, to continue to improve, whether that meant an ever higher output, such as kilometres per litre for fuel economy, an ever lower output, such as lowering the parts per million levels of nitrous oxide in an automobile exhaust, or moving closer and closer to a finite value, such as the European Space Agency’s Philae probe ability to arrive on target on the distant comet, Agilkia.

Visiting Israel recently, I joined a group of international manufacturing executives for a tour of ISCAR, a global supplier of machine tools with a reputation for advancing metalworking. Above the entrance was a symbol of their thinking, a sign that read “Where Innovation Never Stops.”

Under the banner of lean six sigma, organisations have maintained a steadfast commitment for the elimination variation and non-value added activities,

all the while in pursuit of a quality goal of zero defects and a lean objective of zero waste, seen together as the achievement of perfection. As I commented in the October 2012 edition of the *LMJ*, leaders of lean initiatives should be mindful of *the thinking behind lean and ask themselves questions such as;*

Who is best positioned to judge an effort as adding value or contributing waste? Does the conclusion “non-value added” imply a “net present value” calculation for a closed system? That is, who possesses the foresight to accumulate the entire “value added” by an effort, seeking a summation that extends into the future and across an open system that extends beyond reach?

How much time and energy is invested in an organisation in pursuit of activities that are deemed to be well? In a manufacturing environment, this question often translates to “How much time is spent every day in organisations discussing parts which are good and arrive on time?” For programme managers, “How much time is spent reviewing project tasks which are going well?”

Might it be possible that seemingly Utopian end points, such as the achievement of zero defects, zero waste, and the elimination of non-value efforts, stem from how individuals and organisations currently think about their efforts, without realising the conflict between a focus on continuous improvement and the existence of perfection, even if a distant goal? To perceive improvement as continuous requires thinking past stops that offer the illusion of barriers to improvement, much as Sir Roger Bannister raced past a four-minute mile and Chuck Yeager flew a fighter plane beyond the sound barrier. Would continuous improvement be a focus of exploration in Utopia?