

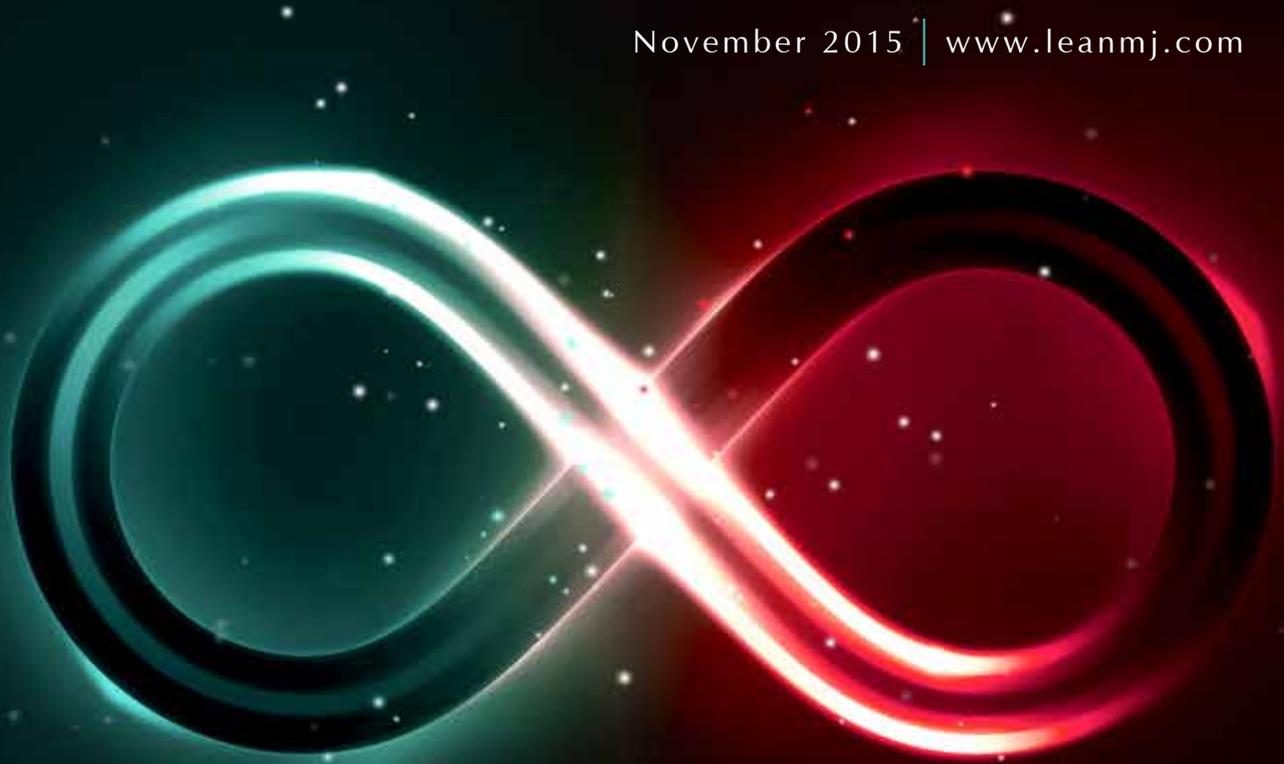
Bill Bellows - On Passing Through

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LIMITLESS LEAN

Can you keep on improving
your organisation forever,
or is there a limit to the
powers of lean?

Organisations and interviews in this issue include representatives from: SPI Lasers, University of Lincoln, Revere AB, Industry Forum, Cardiff Business School, Columbia University.

IN THIS ISSUE:

Three Levels of Continuous Improvement: different ways to keep you moving and improving.

Lean and Innovation: Can you be innovative and lean at the same time?

Laser Lean: LMJ visits SPI lasers to witness their lean routine first hand.



Out of the blue: On Passing Through

My wife and I celebrated our 32nd wedding anniversary earlier this year. Every day, we add 24 hours. Every week, another 7 days. To quote Mick Jagger and Keith Richards, “Time waits for no one, and he won’t wait for me.” On a daily basis, social networking websites remind us of the birthday and wedding anniversaries of friends and family members. My mother-in-law recently celebrated her 87th birthday and soon, my father-in-law will celebrate his 88th. Time goes on, continuously! Yet, to ask someone their age is to ask time to stop, if only momentarily. Legally, we think in terms of aging in increments of years, remaining at a given age for 365 days. Birthday parties remind us when to shift to our next age, in step-like fashion. Somewhere along the line, we discover fractions and half ages appear in a child’s answers to “How old are you?” But, if time waits for no one, these apparent steps disappear, and we enter the realm of “passing through,” realising the difference between thinking of aging continuously and thinking of aging incrementally.

In 1999, Russell Ackoff shared his thoughts on aging, as well as having fun when “denying the obvious and exploring the consequences,” in his classic article, *On Passing Through 80*. Russ lived another 10 years, determined every day to find “the obvious to be wrong.” I had the good fortune of being mentored by him for the last 7 years of his life. “The obvious,” he asserted, “is not what needs no proof, but what people do not want to prove.” He admitted he was heavily influenced by Ambrose Bierce’s definition of self-evident: “Evident to one’s self and to nobody else.”

As introduced in several of my earlier Lean Management Journal articles, including “A Brief History of Quality” (March/April/May

2015), I propose that our thinking includes the constant use of two fundamental modes. One involves the use of categories, such as having two modes of thinking. When confronted with new information, we place it into a pre-existing place in our brain, much the same as placing it into a file folder on a computer or in our desk drawer. Asking “What is this?” is a search for a pre-existing category, perhaps the classification of a rock discovered on a recent hike or the musical cataloging of a new vocalist, such as Sam Smith. At times, the answer involves multiple categories. Consider, for example, using the labels Prime Minister, officer in the British Army, author, artist, and historian to describe Winston Churchill. Should there be difficulty in assigning something new into an existing category; a fresh category can be defined. As when Apple’s iPad release accelerated the marketing of “tablets” to differentiate them from other forms of computers. At other times, previously categorised items can be reassigned, as when Pluto shifted from the planet category into the “dwarf planet” category.

Category Thinking helps us to make order out of apparent chaos, allowing us to navigate through each day. Edward de Bono, author of over 60 books on creative thinking, offers the explanation that our brains are self-patterning mechanisms. In the process of placing new discoveries into one or more categories, differences between these unique items still exist after each placement. Sebastian Coe, Lindford Christie, and Rebecca Adlington fall into the category of “past or present UK Olympians,” yet variation exists; they are not the same. Neither are cloned sheep, beginning with Dolly, as discovered by biologists in Scotland in 1996. Variation also applies to MPs, Queens, doctors,

vice presidents, project managers, and teachers, labels we use every day.

Continuum Thinking recognises these differences, much as a petrol gauge in an automobile allows us to discern the difference between a full tank and a quarter of a tank. The purposeful use of Continuum Thinking allows these differences to be well managed, leading to dramatic improvements in integration efforts, whether they appear in the final assembly of an airplane or the final integration of a new software product.

Given this linguistic foundation, what can be said of options to place the term “lean” into category thinking or continuum thinking? One possibility is that lean represents continuum thinking, owing the explanation to lean’s tenet of “continuous improvement.” Or, could it be “category” thinking, with the explanation that lean does not end in “er”? In the spirit of “lean represents continuum thinking,” I am aware of explanations that a lean implementation effort would include the “continuous elimination of waste,” relentlessly pursued “until all of the waste was eliminated.” What remains to be described is the appearance of an organization with zero waste. This construct, coupled with several other accounts of Toyota, led to a visioning exercise which will be the subject of next month’s column. In the spirit of Russ’s challenge to what appears to be “self-evident,” I am also reminded of his axiom, “getting rid of what you do not want does not get you what you want.” Is it time to pass through the prevailing model of Toyota to another model of their production system, one which acknowledges the deliberate use of both category and continuum thinking?