

Bosch Rexroth Lean Manufacturing Audio Series

Episode 1

“Developing Front-line Supervisors to Succeed in a Lean Environment”

Welcome to the Bosch Rexroth *Lean Manufacturing Audio Series*, where you can hear about new approaches in using lean techniques and principles. We'll discuss how to apply lean concepts in some fresh and perhaps unexpected ways to help you transform the performance of your company.

Our guest is Jamie Flinchbaugh, a founder and partner of the [Lean Learning Center](#) and co-author of the popular book *The Hitchhiker's Guide to Lean*. As both a practitioner and facilitator, he successfully helped many companies in their quest for lean transformation. Today, Jamie and I are going to focus on a key contributor to lean transformation—the front line supervisor. We're going to talk about what lean organizations need to do to make sure supervisors contribute fully in the effort to be lean.

(:53) QUESTION 1:

Front-line supervisors are typically hands-on people working the factory floor, solving problems, keeping things moving. Are those the same kinds of skills they need to succeed in lean?

Jamie: Unfortunately, no. Those are the skills that have made them successful to this point, but lean really requires a different skill set. And we really start off with a fundamental problem that we take super workers and turn them into supervisors. And that's where most of our supervisors come from. We take our best workers, throw them into a supervisory role, give them a little process and procedure training, and then send them on their way. And it requires a completely different set of skills.

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(1:42) QUESTION 2:

So don't organizations automatically include lean-specific supervisor training when they're implementing lean?

Jamie: Unfortunately, Liz, not until they're well down the lean journey. We certainly train managers because they expect to be trained. And we do a lot to engage employees because that's what we think lean is about. So we go in and do all of that work with managers and then all of those extra resources are pulled away. And the ones that are left are the supervisors. They have to support their employees, they have to answer questions, and they have to try and help, and we haven't really prepared them to do that.

(2:16) QUESTION 3:

It sounds like the role of the supervisor in a lean operation is itself transformed. So what's different for them and how must they operate differently?

Jamie: In a typical organization, a supervisor is really a firefighter. They respond to process problems, people problems, and everything from somebody not getting paid, to not enough people showed up that day, to pieces of equipment going down. And there's really a big difference between going from a firefighter to a real problem solver. Someone that is first connected to the problem, connected to their employees, and has the skills and the understanding to know how far to dig and what resources to bring in to solve problems at their root cause.

They also need to be able to observe and experiment for process improvement. As an example, it's very easy to just wait for a problem to occur and then go back and rehash the standard work constructions for everyone. But to be able to observe and understand the system as it's currently working, and then constantly experiment to improve is very different than reacting to the system.

A lot of supervisors are trained how to make sure they juggle their resources to get the right people on the right jobs at the right time and do enough so that they can kind of get through the day. That's

very different than being a coach, which is someone who can actually develop their employees, teach them new skills, help them to understand the work, why it's designed the way it is, and help the employees improve their own work. And so just about every dimension, from how they spend their time to how they engage their employees is transformed for the supervisor as the lean transformation occurs in parallel.

(3:58) QUESTION 4:

A lot of people expect a supervisor to be a coach or team leader. What kind of team leader skills does a lean supervisor need to have?

Jamie: It's important to distinguish coaching the answer versus coaching the process. Just about every manager knows how to coach somebody toward a specific, predetermined solution. But the idea of a team leader or supervisor that really coaches someone...they're coaching them on the process of improvement. They're coaching them on understanding the current state, having that vision of where the ideal is, and the ability to experiment every day towards closing the gap.

So, one of the aspects of being a coach is they really have to be able to ask the right questions, dig deeper, understand where the person is and what they need to succeed. In addition to that, the supervisor really has to treat their area like a small business, which means they can't just look back an hour and forward five minutes. They have to have a plan. They have to have a strategy for how they're going to develop their group, where they need to be, what problems they need to be working on, and even what their ideal state is.

The supervisor also needs to really be able to leverage the group into a team. And the team is more than most people think. If we ask the people what a team is they'll say a group of people headed in a common direction. That's different than being able to leverage each other's strengths, overcome each other's weaknesses, which is what a real team [does]. And so putting all those pieces together,

the supervisor really is managing performance, setting expectations, just like a lot of other leaders, but doing it with a different skill set for their team.

(5:40) QUESTION 5:

It's clear that lean supervisors need to develop a new set of skills. If I'm a front-line supervisor. What can I do to be more successful implementing lean?

Jamie: And that's the million-dollar question. I think it's very important that supervisors take their lives in their own hands for this, and organizations can help them, and they can help themselves. But one is starting with just a simple tool like "waste walks." Being able to take a portion of your day, go out into your process, identify and eliminate waste. Not only is it a good skill to develop, a good lens to develop, but also that's a way to force yourself to engage employees in the process of improvement, versus simply adherence to a standard.

Also, developing standardized work for the supervisor. We spend a lot of time developing standardized work for employees and their jobs but what about the supervisor? We can't really standardize their job because they have to respond to a lot of different signals and issues, but we can standardize what they pay attention to. So, call this "control point standardization," but being able to pay attention to the health of the process that they're responsible for...being able to do a health check just like you would for yourself. You go out and you get your blood pressure checked and your cholesterol checked and you do that with some certain standard in terms of how the frequency works. The same thing should happen for our business process.

(7:12) QUESTION 6:

Can you give us an example of how they would do this standardization?

Jamie: Absolutely. Any organization often struggles with when to focus on standardized work, and they tend to wait until there is a

problem. Once there's a defect that gets into the field, or into their inspection process they go back and check the standardization. That should really be a regular process...to go out and observe how the standardized work is occurring, because if the standardized work isn't working, if there's a problem with it, if there's something in someone's way, that's going to lead to defects down the road.

We find out that the health of the process is broken with some regularity, whether it's daily, weekly, or even monthly, and having a standard for that is part of what the supervisor can do.

(7:58) QUESTION 7:

It sounds like from what you've described, that the front line supervisor really makes a crucial contribution to sustaining lean manufacturing...

Jamie: Absolutely. I think it's one of the most critical factors in success. Many front line supervisors don't really realize the contribution they make. They do realize the challenges that they face, but they are a huge contributor to the success or failure of an organization, whether the organization supports them or not.

In one of our early trainings at the Lean Learning Center, we had a supervisor from an organization of a very large machining-based company, and he was a supervisor of 15 to 30 people. And he said what can I do? My organization is very large. What can I do to change my organization?

Well, you can't change a 50,000-person organization if you only have a span of control of 30, but you can support 30 people better. You have performance expectations, so do a really good job there. Apply lean within that and you'll get a better result out of your work. And if other people learn from that then you've helped the greater part of the organization.

So it's not just enough to just include supervisors in training, we have to really do specific training for supervisors, identify different

skills they need, make sure they have the support in both the systems and the skills, so that they can help the lean journey and not be a hindrance to it.

WRAP-UP: You've been listening to Jamie Flinchbaugh from the [Lean Learning Center](#), talking about front-line supervision in a lean environment.

In our next episode, you'll learn how it's possible to achieve lean transformation in an unlikely arena – the engineering process.

For Bosch Rexroth, I'm Liz Cohen.
Thanks for listening and best wishes for success with *your* next lean project.

Visit the Bosch Rexroth Lean Manufacturing Center on the web at www.boschrexroth-us.com/lean.

You'll find all kinds of downloadable guidebooks, lean kits and other resources. And if you have questions about lean manufacturing, please, use our link and send them in – we'd enjoy hearing from you. Once again, that's www.boschrexroth-us.com/lean.

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