From cars to kids

Lean empowers improvement

> **Key Findings**
>
> - **One UK academy trust, the Learning Trust, comprised of three schools in the Chester area, is using *Lean* principles to eliminate any practice that isn't directly related to learning.**
> - **Using the *Lean* approach means that students and staff take more ownership over their part in the learning process – making decisions based on what will add most value to learning.**
> - **When adopting the *Lean* approach, schools must be totally committed; the entire school must contribute to identifying and eliminating inefficiencies.**

Change is inevitable. It can also be disempowering, traumatic and ultimately fruitless. How can schools improve their impact for learners in a way that gives more power to frontline staff, encourages everyone to buy in to ongoing change, and ensures that gains made become permanent? For Tony Lamberton, CEO of The Learning Trust, the answer is *Lean* principles.

Lean is a strategy pioneered by Toyota, and long familiar to engineers and manufacturers. What Tony has recognised is that this more human and empowering approach to change is applicable within education.

The customer *is* the product

You are probably familiar with the old joke: 'What do you teach? I teach kids.' But thinking in terms of *impact*, *product* and *customer* forces us to consider its implications more deeply. As Tony says:

> *"Part of the journey has been trying to define who the customer is – because we're adding value for the customer – and where we've ended up is that we believe the child is both the product and the customer."*

That insight has enabled increasingly radical improvement.

To start with, it was assumed that eliminating waste in the classroom would mean identifying redundant practices like registration, transition and start-up times – the parts of a lesson that are visibly not about learning. Getting learners involved as customers transformed this view, because "the students have a very clear understanding of value-added learning." They were asked

Lean typically has 5 driving principles:

1. Identify value

2. Map the value stream

3. Create flow

4. Establish pull

5. Seek perfection

to time the parts of lessons in which they believed they were learning, and then later explain what made those activities effective. Teachers are able to design lost time out of their lessons, focusing on what works for students.

No stitch-ups

The *Lean* approach to teaching means openness from staff, and greater responsibility from learners.

At the start of the year, all learning materials for their course are available to students and their parents on line. Learners know exactly where they are going and how they are supposed to get there. They also know that they have the means and the responsibility to catch up whatever they might have missed for any reason. Part of this culture of openness is ensuring there are no nasty surprises. Students and their parents are kept fully aware of progress and next steps, so:

"we're not having parents' evenings where you snitch on the kids."

Openness becomes valuable where learning is based on a coaching model. Direct teacher input is in helping the student to identify strategies to build on progress and address weaknesses. Tony likens this approach to the Andon cord in a Toyota factory – the cord any worker can pull to stop production so the team can work together and solve a problem that has arisen. The principle is: pass no fault forward. It is a common complaint that schools too often gloss over weaknesses, and aim simply to push students over the next assessment hurdle, until finally they enter society with qualifications but also an accretion of educational problems that were never properly addressed. The *Lean* approach is fundamentally opposed to this kind of short-termism which ultimately fails both students and society as a whole.

While the aim is for students to learn more effectively, the application of *Lean* principles also builds up the standing and autonomy of staff. Indeed, *Lean* can deliver no success at all unless staff are reassured at the outset that efficiencies will improve their work, rather than threaten their employment.

Using the *Lean* approach means that all learning materials are provided to learners and parents before the course even starts.

This means that:

- there are no surprises when it comes to learning

- learners have the ability to catch up with whatever they might have missed

***Lean* transforms whole-school culture. Everyone benefits from:**

- stronger commitment to student learning

- knowing the value of what you do

- greater professional autonomy

Ownership

The key to *Lean* in education, as elsewhere, is that people take ownership of their own work:

"It's your work, and you can change it."

Positive change starts with teams defining their own 'value-add.' Once a team – for example, the Teaching Assistants – is clear about its own contribution, workers themselves are best placed to identify redundant practices and inefficiencies. It is this staff 'buy-in' that embeds change, and ensures that improvements are ratcheted up rather than slipping away when the eye of management moves on. This effect is especially powerful where teams themselves are empowered to decide how to allocate the savings they have made. Because *Lean* requires people to identify their own value-add, and design their own improvements around it, the result is not just the progressive elimination of waste but a fundamental cultural change throughout the school.

Inefficiencies must be identified by everyone in the school.

Staff and learners should:

- identify their value-add

- design improvements

- eliminate waste

Why *Lean* might (or might not) be right for you

Tony Lamberton cautions against taking on *Lean* principles lightly. If school leaders decide to use *Lean*, they need to commit to it and honour the whole methodology – a pick and mix approach would be a waste of time. *Lean* is a strategy that requires those at the top to share power in very significant ways. A senior leader neither identifies specific efficiencies and improvements (this is done by staff within their teams), nor can s/he know the overall outcome in advance (as this evolves through many iterations of the process).

Lean is a problem-solver, but one that empowers staff with a sharper sense of the value of their own contribution and a reinforced commitment to meeting the needs of students. It can change the whole culture and mindset of a school. *Lean* has been shown to deliver remarkable and measurable benefits, from improved attainment in national examinations in Mathematics to the saving of hundreds of staff hours from internal assessment processes.