



Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

European Management Journal

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/emj

Values and behaviors of effective lean managers: Mixed-methods exploratory research

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 3 August 2015

Received in revised form

24 April 2016

Accepted 3 May 2016

Available online xxx

Keywords:

Lean management

Work values

Behaviors

Lean leadership

Induction

Video-based behavioral coding

ABSTRACT

Lean Management is a managerial approach focused on enhancing customer value through the elimination of non-value adding steps from work processes. Lean Management is also enjoying a resurgence, largely because its 'do more with less' philosophy is particularly well-suited for the austere conditions of a 'Great Recession' recovery. Despite this resurgence with practitioners, however, academic research of Lean Management, in particular research on the leadership of lean initiatives, remains limited. In this study, we identify a constellation of lean values and behaviors of effective lean managers, based on extant research and the views of expert practitioners, and a field study of lean managers. In the first of two empirical studies, we produce an initial list of values and behaviors, derived from both the lean and leadership literature, and from three Delphi rounds with 19 expert lean practitioners. In study 2, we corroborate and refine the list with a sample of effective lean middle managers, through 18 interviews; a survey ($N = 43$); and fine-grained video-analyses of their *in situ* behaviors during meetings with subordinates. The values identified include: honesty, candor, participation and teamwork, and continuous improvement—all indicative of self-transcendence and openness to change. Regarding behaviors, we find that the effective lean middle managers of our sample, compared to other middle managers, engage significantly more in positive relations-oriented "active listening" and "agreeing" behaviors, and significantly less in "task monitoring" and counterproductive work behaviors (such as "providing negative feedback" and "defending one's own position"). To conclude, we put forward five new propositions intended to guide future research and a more successful practice of 'lean leadership.'

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1. Introduction

Precipitated by events in the financial sector in 2007, and fueled by the bursting of the U.S. and European housing markets, the global economy fell quickly into the 'Great Recession,' considered by the IMF (2009) as the worst global economic decline since World War II. Today, while the worst of the crisis may have passed, certain effects linger, particularly in regard to organizations' significantly reduced access to capital and credit (Bolger, 2015). Not surprisingly, Lean Management and other non-capital intensive approaches to

improving efficiency, eliminating waste and enhancing customer value, are enjoying a resurgence (Bhamu & Sangwan, 2014; Samuel, Found, & Williams, 2015). To illustrate, executive search firm Avery Point Group reported that the number of lean job postings in 2013 had more than doubled since the beginnings of the post-crisis recovery. Expanding beyond manufacturing, Lean Management is also being increasingly adopted by service and public sector organizations (Bhamu & Sangwan, 2014; Cox & Chicksand, 2005; Piercy & Rich, 2009) that face the similar challenge of 'doing more with less.' As for academic research, Bhamu and Sangwan (2014), in their review of the academic research from 75 international journals and eight conferences, document a marked uptick in lean publications beginning in 2009. Moyano-Fuentes and Sacristan-Diaz (2012) have classified the lean literature into four categories: shop floor, value chain, work organization, and geography. Papadopoulou and Özbayrak (2005) provide a six-part categorization: production floor management; product/process-oriented; production planning,

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scheduling, and control; lean implementation; work-force management; and supply chain management.

What we find conspicuously absent from these categorizations of research, however, and despite its importance, is a category focused specifically on leadership. For Liker and Convis (2012, p. xiii), “the biggest gap in capabilities in the lean movement, and the root cause of failure on many lean programs, is in leadership.” Organizational psychologist and lean expert David Mann refers to leadership as “the missing link” in lean practice and research: “implementing [lean] tools represents at most 20 percent of the effort in Lean transformations. The other 80 percent of the effort is expended on changing leaders’ practices and behaviors, and ultimately their mindset” (Mann, 2009, p. 15). The purpose of this exploratory research, therefore, is to know more about the leaders of lean initiatives. More specifically, and as called for by Glynn and Raffaelli (2010) and Lakshman (2006), we will undertake systematic research into the work behaviors of lean leaders, and the underlying work values on which those behaviors are believed to depend (Bardi & Schwartz, 2003; Connor & Becker, 1994; Deichmann & Stam, 2015; Denison, 1996; Fu, Tsui, Liu, & Li, 2010; Jonsen, Galunic, Weeks, & Braga, 2015; Lakshman, 2006; Lord & Brown, 2001; Schein, 2004; Schwartz et al., 2012; Szabo, Reber, Weibler, Brodbeck, & Wunderer, 2001; Yukl, 2012).

Following Szabo et al. (2001, p. 225), we define leader ‘behaviors’ as specific observable verbal and nonverbal actions of managers “in interaction with their followers in an organizational setting.” Similar to Schwartz (1999), ‘values’ are defined as desirable notions a person carries with him/her at all times as a guide for his/her behavior. While our intent is to explicate values and behaviors, we do not focus on the potential linkages between the two. Arguably, numerous situational factors will mediate or moderate this values-behaviors relationship, e.g. one’s intentions, choices, attitudes, and emotions (Connor & Becker, 1994; Szabo et al., 2001). Yet, compared to the more situationally-determined factors, values tend to have a relatively stable influence on behavior (Jin & Rounds, 2012). The propositions in the Discussion section provide direction for follow-up studies to more fully understand the connections between lean values and behaviors.

To derive what we will later refer to as a ‘constellation’ of lean values and behaviors, we conducted two empirical field studies—first to build a list, and second to corroborate and refine that list with *in situ*, video-based observation of lean managers in action. In study 1, based on our initial systematic review of both the lean and leadership literature, and following the approach of MacCarthy, Lewis, Voss, and Narasimhan (2013) and Marodin and Saurin (2013), we distilled a preliminary list of lean values and behaviors. To supplement this preliminary list, 19 expert lean practitioners were queried, using a Delphi process, as to the values and behaviors of effective lean managers. These activities produced a preliminary constellation of 24 values and 19 behaviors, which formed the basis for study 2.

For study 2, we chose a sample of effective lean managers from the ranks of middle management. For many and perhaps most organizations, leadership responsibilities for lean initiatives often fall upon middle managers. As noted by several authors, they bear the challenging responsibility of effectuating top-down mandates through shop-floor practices (Beer, 2003; Holmemo & Ingvaldsen, 2015; Nonaka, 1994; Scherrer-Rathje, Boyle, & Deflorin, 2009; Worley & Doolen, 2006). With this sample, we used multi-source interviewing and Q-sorting of the values, and survey and video analyses of *in situ* behaviors to address this central research question: *What are the specific values and behaviors of effective middle managers of lean initiatives?* (Fig. 1)

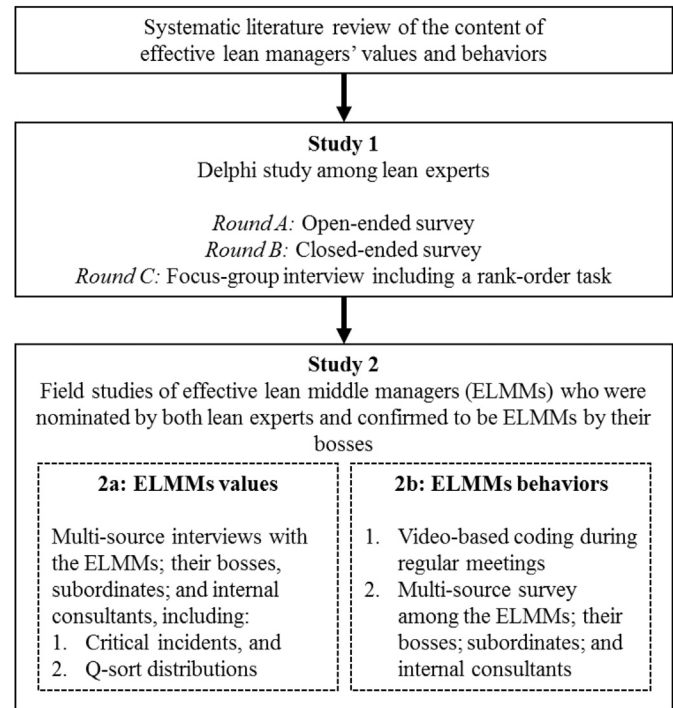


Fig. 1. Visualization of the research design, using mixed methods.

2. Systematic literature review

We performed a systematic search among Web of Science, Scopus and Google Scholar, using all combinations of the following search terms in the title, abstract, or keywords: “lean,” “TQM,” “leader*,” “manager*,” “value*,” and “behavior*.” From the initially identified 515 papers, we selected the journal and review-type papers and removed conference-type papers. Articles where individual managers were not the main focus were also removed. After cross-checking the 21 remaining articles, we added one relevant book (Liker & Convis, 2012). None of these sources focused exclusively on the content of managerial values and behaviors; the selected articles mostly dealt with higher-level management of lean initiatives; only nine of them were empirical studies. This situation highlights the theoretical relevance of the present study. Table 1 lists the values and behaviors that were noted by two or more of these sources. This literature-based list will be further refined in study 1 and 2.

2.1. Managerial values in the lean and leadership literature

Two of the selected empirical field studies have explored the values held by effective lean managers (i.e., Larsson & Vinberg, 2010; Waldman et al., 1998). Based on a multiple-case study, Waldman et al. (1998) inferred that “continuous improvement,” “teamwork,” “customer focus,” and delivering high product and process “quality,” are among the set of values of effective lean managers. Larsson and Vinberg (2010) noted only “management commitment.” The values emphasized in other Lean Management literature are: a manager-employee relationship of equality, based on employee participation and teamwork; respect; and a focus on continuous process improvement from the customers’ perspective (see, Table 1).

Because empirical studies of lean managers’ values are sparse, it is questionable whether Table 1’s list contains the full values set

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