

Introduction

One of the central rubrics of lean management guidance is that managers should always act from a basis of knowledge (Ballé 2009; Emiliani 1998). The central component of this knowledge is the Lean model’s understanding about the nature of people. The reasons for this should be clear. Lean enterprises are inherently cooperative efforts involving all members of an extended value stream. These members are engaged in commerce with each other. They continuously exchange resources (information, raw inputs, intermediate outputs, knowledge, etc.) between them to enable each other’s success and the success of all in providing value-adding offerings to customers. These acts of exchange are both a personal *and* social in nature. At a personal level, each individual—owner, worker, supplier, or customer—decides whether to engage in commerce and to what end. Each person decides what he or she will exchange, with whom, and under what circumstances. At the social level, people must connect with their potential partners in commerce, engage them in the exchange of resources, and involve them in making that exchange. Prior to that moment, persons initiating an exchange must shape their offering and its presentation so that it addresses the values and needs of its recipients. All of these issues and more are recognized as important within Lean thinking.

In this light, an extended value stream may be seen as a cluster of commercial activities that create and maintain a cooperative enterprise such as a modern business. Included in this “commerce” are the interactions that occur within and between every group that contributes to the ultimate exchange between a business and its customers. As just a few examples, consider the commerce that occurs between an organization and (a) its employees concerning their employment, (b) its suppliers concerning ordering and receiving their needed inputs, (c) its governmental regulators concerning compliance with regulations and license to operate, and (d) any other entity from which the business needs something.

A fundamental implication of this fact is that all the cooperative activities that create, operate, sustain, and enable the success of a lean enterprise require the effective cooperation among many people. How do we as managers ensure the success of these tasks? What knowledge about people informs our judgments about connecting and communicating with others? What knowledge guides us in engaging, involving, enabling, and ensuring each person’s success and our collective success in implementing a Lean enterprise?

Assumptions About Human Nature

It is our understanding of the nature of people from which management guidance flows. This knowledge is represented as a commercial approach’s (e.g., Lean Enterprise’s) view of people’s inherent motives, values, goals, and social inclination. Do people act on the basis of external rewards alone, for example, or is their behavior directed by inner values other than the acquisition of material rewards? Are people inclined to be cooperative or self-serving? Do the ends

they natively seek serve themselves alone? Are people inclined to consider the position of others? Each of these questions affects whether and how an organization can be created and sustained; whether and how people can be aligned to a common goal; whether and how one can successfully engage, involve, and enable their successful performance. And all these behaviors constitute lean manager responsibilities.

The prevailing producer-focused, profit-maximizing approach to commerce has explicit assumptions about human motivation and the ends people pursue. It views people as rationally pursuing their self interest without regard for the welfare of other people (Hosseini 2010; Hubel 2014; Yamagishi, Takagishi, Matsumoto, and Kiyonari 2014). For producers, self-interest is profit measured monetarily. By extension, this would apply to workers as well since they too are sellers. They sell their labor to employers. For customers, self-interest is understood to be garnering maximum “utility” from every transaction. Utility refers to acquiring the greatest possible satisfaction of the value the person seeks to satisfy. In the producer-focus, profit-maximizing approach to commerce, this too is measured monetarily. In other words, human behavior —whether as producer, worker, supplier, or customer—is driven to realize for oneself the maximum acquisition of personal gain measured monetarily. Given these assumptions, a manager would expect each person in a commercial context to operate selfishly unless acted upon to do otherwise.

What management guidance flows from this model’s assumptions about people’s nature? How would you recruit workers? How would you ensure that they perform their work as you specify? Based on its assumptions, people should be recruited using monetary incentives. Management should be directive and controlling. Workers should be actively supervised to ensure that they align to the organization’s purpose since their intrinsic direction is to pursue their own purpose. Given that their purpose is to maximize their own benefits, they will be inclined to do the least to get the most. That is, to take the rewards while not having to give the effort expected in return. Thus, a manager will need to monitor performance to ensure that he or she is getting full worth for money spent. Management will need to establish rewards and punishment schedules to ensure that the conduct of workers match what the organization needs to maximally profit. By extension, each worker should be vigilant to ensure that he or she is not being exploited by management. In fact, every party in every exchange must be vigilant to safeguard his or her interest. Hence, every market—a context within which people make exchanges—is ruled by the principle of *caveat emptor*.

What Is Lean Thinking’s Understanding of People?

What are Lean Enterprise’s assumptions about people? How does Lean thinking replace this producer-focused, profit-maximizing set of assumptions?

Little content in the Lean literature directly addresses the issue of Lean's view of people's native inclinations. Yet, Lean thinking's understanding of human nature is the knowledge foundation that underpins its Lean management guidance. In its current state, Lean management's guidance is essentially a set of rubrics that clarify what one should do and how one should behave. "Strive for perfection in all operations," "Go to the source to find the facts" (Genchi Genbutsu), and "Respect people" are three examples. A model's understanding of people's motives, inclinations, values, and goals explain the "why" beneath Lean management's rubrics. It is what allows a Lean manager to act from a basis of knowledge, not imitation. The question is: "Can one extract from these Lean management rubrics Lean's view of the nature of people?" Can one derive from them the "why" beneath the behavioral guidance? Our conclusion is that, except in the few instances where a Lean writer specifically addresses people's nature, you cannot. Although it may appear otherwise, it is not possible to extract from Lean management rubrics a definitive statement of Lean's assumptions about the nature of people.

The Problem

The Lean literature's guidance for managers derives from the practices observed within the Toyota Motor Company or the teachings of one or another former Toyota manager or supervisor. They are documented in the works of Emiliani (2007, 2007a, 2008, 2009), Imai (1986, 1997), Liker (2004), Liker and Convis (2011), Liker and Hoseus (2008), Liker and Meier (2007), Rother (2009), Shook (2010, 2011, 2013, 2013a, 2013b, 2014), and Womack (2006, 2009, 2009a), and Womack and Jones (2003) among others.

As presented in these writings, Lean's management rubrics are clear and consistent. They represent "do's and don'ts" that Lean managers should follow as they work with people in implementing a Lean enterprise. For example, Lean managers should elicit people's ideas for improving business operations and support them in acting on those ideas so that the business improves continuously. They should enable people's success in performing their roles by providing them guidance through visual knowledge displays that remind them of the flow of work and information displays that tell them the status of the operations they are implementing. They should recognize people for their growth and improvement in the mastery of processes and not simply focus on their result outcomes. They should empower people to prevent failures by installing devices like andon cords so they can stop errant operations immediately—on their own authority.

One might surmise that these and other Lean management rubrics suggest people can think rationally. They could reasonably suggest that people can align their thinking and doing with an organization's purpose and make decisions that advance that purpose not simply their own. The rubrics might also imply that people act responsibly when given the latitude to take actions that can significantly affect business operations. It might seem that the rubrics all

presume that people will voluntarily develop ideas that improve the value of the business’s processes and products. But, these judgments of underlying meaning are all *possibilities*, not certainties. Lean management literature does not state explicitly what the motives, values, and inclinations of people are. It does not tell us at all about the other features that form human nature, affect human commerce, and decide whether, how, and under what conditions people will work together for a common aim.

Indeed, while Lean management’s rubrics can stimulate thinking about human nature, their implications for the fundamental nature of people are almost always *equivocal*. Fundamentally, the rubrics tell a manager how to *behave* so that he or she replicates the manner of performance exhibited by people who presumably exemplify the Lean approach to commerce. They do not express the underlying thinking about human nature that explains why the rubrics are essential.

On the one hand, this is understandable given that the guidance is derived from behavioral observations or reports of instructional points passed down from ‘elders.’ On the other hand, it is odd because one of the important rubrics of Lean management is that all contributors should challenge the “given” by asking the “Why?” question (Womack 2009a). The ‘Why?’ question, when repeatedly asked, progressively develops a deeper understanding of the causes and significance of observed behaviors. This knowledge enables one to properly assess the utility of what one is being directed to be do and offer suggestions or enhancements to current methods and guidance.

If the ‘why’ had been asked of the people from whom these management rubrics were received, they might have revealed Lean’s thinking about human nature. Absent that exercise, we do not know the understanding about people that generated these rubrics. We lack the knowledge that underpins them and should guide their application. We just know that they are deemed essential to do. And, reduced to imitation, we violate another Lean management rubric. That rubric asserts that Lean managers should always act from a base of knowledge (Shook 2010a, 2013a).

An Example of “Equivocal” Meaning

One cornerstone rubric in Lean management is that people must be treated with respect (Ballé 2015; Baudin 2013; Emiliani 2008, 2009; Shook 2011; Liker and Hoseus 2008; and many others). But why? It is said by Shook that “We respect people because we believe it’s the right thing to do and simply because it makes good business sense” (Shook 2011). While we are personally comfortable with the first part of this statement (“it’s the right thing to do”), neither it nor the second part—that it “makes good business sense”—provides a precise insight into Lean’s view of people’s nature.

From the first part (“it’s the right thing to do”), one might infer that people in general or Lean commerce implementers in specific are naturally inclined to respect other people and thus carry a fundamental conviction about its “rightness.” But such a conclusion flies in the face of having to make ‘respecting others’ a Lean management rule. That statement, as a mandate, is more consistent with the findings across decades of survey data reporting how employees feel they are typically treated by their workplace superiors. Commonly, only a minority of employees report feeling respected by their bosses.¹

Also, if this “rule” about respecting people were just an affirmation of an inner sense of right and wrong, why present the rationale that “it makes good business sense”? While research supports that assertion (Harter, Schmidt, and Killham 2003; Harter, Schmidt, Agrawal, and Plowman 2013; Porath 2014), the statement itself suggests that the reason we should treat others with respect is *utilitarian* in nature. It implies that people will provide us more of what we want if we show them respect. That implication supports two other inferences that conflict with each other. The first is that people value being respected and will reciprocate by offering value in return. This assertion is consistent with the empirically supported principle of reciprocity (Coyle-Shapiro and Kessler 2002; Diekmann 2004; Dolivo and Taborsky 2012; Wikhamn and Hall 2012). The second possible inference is that people in general or managers in specific operate from self-interest. They take an action in order to gain a benefit they seek. The “self interest” part is suggested by the *quid pro quo* nature of the reasoning for management offering employees respect—namely, that they will get more or better outcomes from them. If that is true, the offering of respect is a mere instrumentality to an end. “I behave in this way to get from you what I want.” This leads to a paradox. Respect involves recognizing and genuinely valuing some personal quality in another. Its expression honors the presence of that valued quality in the other. It has no other purpose. It is not a manipulative act. Indeed, manipulative acts are commonly experienced as insincere and *disrespectful*.

Historically, there is a reasonable basis for thinking that the edict to respect people is utilitarian at its roots and is implemented because it gets one what they need. Certainly, Toyota’s shift in its treatment of employees post strike in 1950 seems utilitarian based. As Shimokawa and Fujimoto (2009) indicate, Toyota’s cooperative labor-management strategy was triggered by a significant rise in demand for vehicles by the U.S. Army to wage its war in Korea. Toyota needed to ramp up its workforce. After World War II, however, the Toyota workforce created its own labor union. Before the war, all industry labor unions were company sponsored and company controlled. By 1950, despite the repressive efforts of the U.S. Army,² unions did

¹ See Porath (2014) for a recent assessment of whether employees feel respected by their bosses. She reports that a worldwide survey conducted by Harvard Business Review found that “over half (54%) of employees claimed that they don’t regularly get respect from their leaders.”

² In 1947, General Douglas MacArthur, the U.S. Supreme Commander of the Allied Powers (SCAP) instituted a “reverse course” that undid earlier liberalization of worker rights to form unions and union rights to bargain for labor’s goals. “The first salvo involved MacArthur banning a general strike that had been called for 1 February 1947. This signaled the beginning of the end for the radical union movement as SCAP withdrew its support and encouraged the union-busting tactics of Japanese corporations and the government” (Xiaohua 2010. p.

emerge somewhat free of company control and represented a force Japanese management needed to address. Union unrest was triggered by downsizing across Japan due the reduced demand for Japanese products. Layoffs occurred at Toyota as well and led to strike. With the emergence of the new demand for vehicles by the U.S. Army, thanks to the Korean War, Toyota needed to reverse course. They needed to ramp up employment. Faced with meeting this new demand for products and having to deal with a need for workers in the face of an unhappy workforce, an independent union, and a labor strike—Toyota adopted a cooperative approach to labor management relations.

Even more than a decade later in its 1962 Joint Declaration of Labor and Management (Toyota Motor Company 1962), Toyota’s conduct seems instrumentally drive. That declaration anchors itself in economic necessity. In that instance, it was the challenge of meeting the added competition that the approaching passenger car trade liberalization would usher in. That declaration tells us nothing about the nature of people. It just clarifies what Toyota would provide its employees in order to get them to commit to fulfilling Toyota’s needs—a straightforward example of *quid pro quo* behavior.

The 2003 Toyota statement of Relations with Employees (Toyota Motor Company 2007) emphasizes the “win-win” benefits of mutual trust and respect and employee investment in self improvement. For employees, it promises “long-term employment,” “stability in their lives,” and “opportunities for self-realization and growth.” For the company it promises better business outcomes and “corporate development.” Again, this suggests a utilitarian rational for the management rubric of “respect for people” not some native appreciation for the inherent value of each person or humanity in general (Miller 2018), or a rooted experience of affinity for others.

If we turn to the famed “The Toyota Way 2001” document for deeper clarification, we will apparently be disappointed. According to Baudin (2013), that document does not provide any deeper understanding for the edict, “respect for people.” While the document is closely held by the company, Baudin was provided the opportunity to read it. He states, “As a stand-alone document ... it’s not that useful Based on its content alone, it would be difficult to tell the Toyota Way apart from other corporate philosophies like the HP [Hewlett-Packard] way. A manager of a mid-size traditional plant, reading The Toyota Way 2001, would reasonably conclude that all he or she needed to do to emulate Toyota was follow its recommendations.”

Further obscuring Toyota’s underlying thinking about human nature, is Eiji Toyoda’s comments that no new understanding of people was involved in its 1950 shift in management-employee relations (see Shimokawa and Fujimoto, 2009, pages 242–45). Indeed, he saw it as simply formalizing what had been Toyota’s prior commitment to labor-management

13). See also, Chomsky (1991) and Dower (1999).

cooperative relations. Historical facts do not support that position. They suggest that, previously, Toyota applied a Taylor-oriented management perspective.³

More to the point, Eiji Toyoda shares no deeper perspective about the nature of people that would explain the company’s shift from its essentially a Taylor-orient management perspective toward workers to what we understand to be the Lean perspective. Indeed, he simply states, “we formalized our perspective in the labor management declaration. We etched that commitment in a stone memorial on some anniversary of the declaration. That’s about all there is to say. We put it in writing on a stone monument in front of the entrance to our headquarters” (Shimokawa and Fujimoto, 2009, pp. 243–44).

While Eiji Toyoda’s statements appear to be meant to suggest that Toyota’s behavior toward it workers did not change, we believe it did. We simply cannot find in the statements made by the Toyota Motor Company any explanation for the change in terms of some new or renewed understanding of who people are. Rather, they all seem utilitarian based.

Be clear, the above analysis is not meant to imply any insincerity in Toyota management’s “respect for people.” It is intended to clarify that from the “respect for people” edict itself, one cannot definitively deduce the “why” behind the edict. It provides us no certain insight into either company’s view of human nature or the Lean model’s view.

Bottom Line

Based on our analysis of Lean management’s rubrics, our conclusion is that you cannot confidently reason backwards from rubrics to assumptions about people’s nature. This should not be unexpected as backward reasoning using either modus tolens (with formal knowledge systems) or abduction (with empirically-based knowledge systems) always produces uncertain conclusions. Using Modus tolens as your inferencing principle, for example, arriving at certain conclusions requires an absolute and singular relationship between an antecedent and its consequent. This means that it only generates a certain conclusion when there exists either one possible antecedent alone or one inclusive set of antecedents all of which must be true. If there are many independent antecedents, then reasoning backward cannot generate a certain solution. For example, an absolute rule might be “If A and B and C are true, then D is true.” Given such a rule *and no other rule that can generate conclusion D*, modus tolens will produce a certain inference. It will not, however, generate a correct conclusion if their are multiple

³ While there has been an effort to reshape Taylor’s view of workers positively, any reading of his diary entries and private communications will dispel that revisionism. Even in his book *The Principles of Scientific Management*, a document that his biographer Kanigel (1997) reports Taylor as writing with an agenda to soften his own anti-labor image with the public, he states: “It is well within the mark to state that in nineteen out of twenty industrial establishments the workmen believe it to be directly against their interests to give their employers their best initiative, and that instead of working hard to do the largest possible amount of work and the best quality of work for their employers, they deliberately work as slowly as they dare while they at the same time try to make those over them believe that they are working fast” (Taylor 1911, page 11). Taylor’s view of human nature—at least that of the working class—is identical to the assumptions of the producer-focused, profit-maximizing approach to commerce described above.

independent reasons why D may be true. In that case, if we find “D” to be true, we know that at least one of the multiple antecedents is true but not which one. For example, given the following two independent rules, we know that if we observe “respect for people” the antecedent in one or the other is true, but not which one.

Rule 1: “If you seek to get the most out of people, then express respect for people.”

Rule 2: “If you experience human being as possessing inherent value then express respect for people.”

As to abduction, it only generates ‘possible’ conclusions and never certain ones. If it akin to statistical inferencing: “Given that we observe with great frequency A occurring prior to D occurring, then given that we D, it is likely that A occurred.”

Unequivocal Assertions About the Nature of People

We have found a few instances where a Lean writer speaks directly to the nature of people. In his essay, *The Essence of Developing People and Yourself*, Shook (2014) asserts that “Individuals seek challenges.” He also states that it is through challenges that “unending development comes” (Shook, 2014). While he does not explicitly state that people also seek unending development, this would be a reasonable, if uncertain, inference. This conclusion is further supported by Shook’s endorsement of Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi’s theory about the human experience of “flow.”⁴ Csikszentmihalyi defines the state of flow as, “being completely involved in an activity for its own sake. The ego falls away. Time flies. Every action, movement, and thought follows inevitably from the previous one, like playing jazz. Your whole being is involved, and you’re using your skills to the utmost” (Geirland 1996).

The “flow” experience is similar in nature to the management construct of engagement, but it incorporates added elements. For example, “The flow state is an optimal state of intrinsic motivation, where the person is fully immersed in what he is doing” (Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi 2016). The construct of engagement does not incorporate the notion of intrinsic motivation. Essentially Csikszentmihalyi’s theory asserts that individuals are transformed through active involvement in modifying themselves and their situations so that they achieve greater success in what they are attempting to accomplish. The flow experience emerges at the point where a person undertakes the maximum level of challenge he or she is capable of resolving. The growth that emerges from that experience raises both the level of challenge the person can undertake and the person’s skills and proficiencies in dealing with it. Thus, it creates the opportunity for renewed flow experiences which the person then pursues.

⁴ Csikszentmihalyi’s construct of “flow” has *nothing* to do with the Lean construct of flow in processes. Csikszentmihalyi’s construct concerns human phenomenology, not explicit instrumental processes.

Shook, however, is conditional as regards people’s natural inclination to learn, which seems at odds with his notion that people seek challenges and development, and his endorsement of Csikszentmihalyi’s theory. Shook states that some people have within them a “searching for more, for more challenges, for more learning. A hunger for learning and to make things better” (Shook, 2014). When his endorsement of Csikszentmihalyi’s theory and this latter quoted statement are juxtaposed, it becomes uncertain what his position is on the fundamental nature of people. This, again, is not a criticism of Shook. His main purpose in these writings is to instruct Lean managers in the way they should behave and not the knowledge from which his guidance ultimately derives. For Shook and all other writers about Lean management, their guidance is instrumentally focused—i.e., ‘to be a Lean manager, you need to do this and behave this manner.’ This type of guidance is consistent with its origins in observing the actions of assumed exemplars in accomplishing a task.

The Lean Model’s Missing Assumptions About The Nature of People

The conclusion from our analysis of the Lean management literature is that it does not contain a description of the assumptions about people that explain the rational basis for its guidance. Yet, such a source exists within its historical development. That source is the writings of W. Edwards Deming. Deming did indeed represented a coherent perspective on the nature of people. It is one of the four domains of “profound knowledge” that Deming declares managers must master because they are the “why” behind all management decision making and actions (Deming 2000; Vitalo 2017). These four domains of knowledge are:

- a theory of organization (the nature of systems),
- the concept of variation and its significance,
- a theory of knowledge, and
- the basic principles that reveal the nature of people and the source of their striving.

Should the Lean community seek to develop its fundamental premises about the nature of people, human organizations, and commerce itself—Deming’s thinking would be the place to start.

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