

Coaching a Firefighter

By: Greg Lane



Recently a firefighter friend of mine, who was going through the fire chief promotion process, asked me to review a paper he was writing to fulfill one of the application requirements. He had already advanced through many steps (tests, interviews, exercises) and was now one of the final three candidates. His next step was to write a 500-600 word paper describing how he would approach a problem within his current responsibilities (as shift supervisor at the fire station). He asked for my help, not from a “Lean Thinking” perspective, just as a friend who had more experience in writing papers and reports.



The problem he identified was poorly organized medical supplies at the two fire stations for which he was responsible. The poor organization was causing excessive time looking for supplies and contributed to contaminated stock. He offered a very detailed solution including which supplies should be stored at which station, how they

should be stored, and an overview of a cabinet to be constructed. I imagine his solution had merits and would make the process of finding supplies easier, but it would be *his* solution pushed down onto the teams at both stations. However, this might not be the leadership approach desired by his superiors within the fire department.

For lean practitioners the 5S (Workplace Organization) method comes immediately to mind as a solution. Though before pushing him towards *my* solution involving the 5S methodology, which might only entail swapping my solution for his, I felt we needed to begin by reviewing the problem statement. I shared how a good problem statement likely includes the *quantifiable gap between the current and the desired situation*, so that's where we began. It became apparent there was no data showing lost time finding supplies nor the instances when items had become contaminated. I asked if there were any established standards regarding supply storage that were not being met but again there was no quantifiable gap. Through discussion and reflection, an additional issue was identified. The unorganized medical supplies were partially responsible for periodic shortages of supplies.

After he developed a better problem statement, we discussed whether a leader should offer specific solutions or coach the team through identifying solutions. Would this approach lead to higher levels of engagement? Would the team take ownership of implementation and maintain the solutions? We reached the conclusion that he would be a better leader and a more qualified candidate for promotion.

We discussed a structure he might use to lead the team in resolving the problem and I shared the 5S method. I Googled a few sites explaining 5S and waited as my friend read through them. Now with some excitement he saw how he could lead the team through the 5 steps and proceeded to utilize this as the outline for his rewrite. From there on I only helped dot a few i's and cross a few t's, the paper basically rewrote itself. Now we had a document that clearly showed how he could help identify a problem that affected the team, and better yet, how he could lead (via coaching) the team to implementing their own sustainable improvements as a step in the continuous improvement journey.

I found the paper itself was less important; instead I was encouraged by my friend's enhanced understanding of the difference between the *push* style of a manager and the *pull* style of a leader. Likely my friends' final judgment will be influenced by whether or not he gets the job.

Epilogue: This week my friend informed me that he received the highest score on his paper by a long shot and moves on to the final interview step. I guess the fire department's leadership recognizes the value in a coaching approach towards problem solving!

Greg Lane

Lean Enterprise Institute faculty member Greg Lane learned and implemented lean principles while at Toyota and NUMMI (New United Motor Manufacturing, Inc.), the Toyota-GM joint venture. After purchasing a job shop manufacturing company, Lane led it through a successful lean transformation. He is the author of [Culturally on Plan](#), [Made-to-Order Lean: Excelling in a High-Mix, Low-Volume Environment](#) and [Mr. Lean Buys & Transforms a Manufacturing Company](#).