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EXPERT VIEW on Lean: Paula McNicholas

Paula McNicholas, Founder of Lean Team Strategies

significant in increasing productivity and profits as well as creating better working environments while reducing stress.”

What constitutes as stress has changed dramatically over the past few weeks and while we had never heard of social distancing in the past, it is now paramount.

McNicholas says the new NSAI Workplace Protection and Improvement Guide in the main calls for physical distancing, hygiene practices, performance monitoring and training, and just as Lean is a disciplined approach, any company putting these processes in place will need to apply the same rigour.

“Key concepts in Lean such as visual management, workplace organisation and standard work are directly applicable,” she says. “Physical distancing can be obtained by simple measures such as markings on the floor every two metres. This makes it much easier for workers to keep themselves safe. Zoning areas in different colours and restricting movement is another guideline which correlates directly with the Lean 5S system of workplace organisation.”

IN THIS EDITION OF ‘EXPERT VIEW,’ WE SPEAK WITH PAULA MCNICHOLAS, LEAN SPECIALIST AND FOUNDER OF LEAN TEAM STRATEGIES IN THE WEST.

Usually when we talk about living in ‘lean times’ we are referring to a period of frugality and hardship. But Paula McNicholas of Lean Team Strategies specialises in a different type of lean altogether.

As a Lean consultant, she promotes continuous improvement and respect for people in their business model which during these increasingly uncertain times is more crucial than ever to help employers reduce stress while continuing to keep their business running.

“The Local Enterprise Office Lean for Micro Programme is aimed at micro and small businesses,” says the business consultant and engineer. “It introduces Lean concepts and supports the implementation of Lean systems, processes and thinking into an organization. The results of this are



“If people have everything they need for the job close to them, there is no need to go elsewhere for tools, parts, sanitiser or tissues. There also needs to be discipline in handwashing/ sanitising and regular cleaning of surfaces, so visual standards and cleaning schedules are great for keeping discipline and accountability on this.

“Monitoring of performance to these guidelines can be done through audits and metrics. But this isn’t about catching people out, it’s about their own safety and feeling more in control of their environment in a world which seems so out of control right now.”

According to McNicholas, it’s difficult to see or know what is going on if you don’t have the right systems in place.

“This might be causing a lot of business owners to be anxious right now but the more you can make things visual and transparent, the less stress there will be,” she says.

“Communication with your remote workers is key and this needs to be two-way and include the opportunity for workers to communicate with each other as a team. People want to do a good job and be productive, so we have to give them the tools to do that.”

And, she says, there are some good tools available such as communication and project management apps which can continue to be used as the basis of a Lean management system going forward – but the most important thing is to keep talking.

“The key concept here is that everyone knows what is expected of them on a daily and weekly basis,” she advises.

“They need to know what the objectives, metrics and targets are. Video conferencing tools can be used for live video meetings both as a means of daily communication and for collaboration on projects. So there should be an arranged time (or several) every day, where the team get together through video conference to review status, highlight issues and just to give them the feel of the office with a bit of social interaction to keep everyone sane, especially the extroverts.

“Encourage them to collaborate and be there for them on a one-to-one basis too.”

The Lean expert says it is also important to plan ahead in order to give everyone some hope for the future.

“Put a plan together for the next two months and break that down from monthly to weekly, share with your team, align them with the goals, and get them to break down the weekly into daily activities and make it measurable,” she advises. “This will help them to feel and be more productive and will give you some reassurance on aspects you can control.”

“Ultimately, implementing Lean can help you move from short term survival to long term success.”

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Key Advice:

- Lean methodology will help to reduce added stress on both employers and employees during this current crisis.
- Communication is key and it’s important to speak to staff via video conference and let them speak to each other in the same format in order to keep some semblance of normality.
- Where people are working through the crisis, ensure all the health and safety measures are in place to minimize their stress levels and exposure to possible risks.
- Make sure everyone knows what is required of them during this period of uncertainty and let them know that they can get in touch if necessary.
- Put a business plan together for when the crisis is over.

Useful links:

Lean Business Ireland
www.leanbusinessireland.ie

Lean Implementation in Micro & Small Enterprises Book of Cases 2020

LocalEnterprise.ie/Discover-Business-Supports/LEAN/