

Language as a branding tool: Lean management, Lean metaphors, and the special Lean words

Branding normally concerns products or corporations. Coca-Cola is a strong product brand. Apple combines a strong product brand with a unique corporate brand. In the modern business environment, however, the concept of branding now encompasses the branding of management philosophies and management activities as reflected in the branding of the popular management philosophy of Lean. Language, metaphors and special lexical choices play an important factor in the branding of Lean management as unique and innovative.

Looking at Lean language from a lexical point of view, Lean language is dominated by a series of coded Japanese words and references which only initiated members of the Lean management team can decode. Muda (seven types of waste), kaizan, kanban and pokayoke are central concepts in Lean management – but the terms are meaningless and inaccessible for non-members of the Lean community. Language and terminology, in other words, help brand Lean management as new and special.

The special Lean words are supported by a set of special Lean metaphors which contribute to establishing an appealing framework of organizational fitness, adaptability and speed. Language, in other words, plays an important part in the branding of Lean management as action-oriented and innovative.

What is Lean?

Lean management originates from the production industry, especially the mass production of automobiles. The DNA code of Lean management philosophy is directly related to Frederick Taylor's theory of Scientific Management from 1911, which introduces key concepts such as standardization, control, hierarchy and the fragmentation of workflow (Norlyk, 2009). Both theories are developed for mass production purposes and both theories have strong links to the car industry. In the early 19th century, the production of Ford motorcars was inspired by Scientific Management. In the late 19th century, Toyota and the Toyota Way of production form an essential part of the principles behind Lean management.

Essentially, Lean management is about the elimination of waste and the importance of constantly improving productivity. The key Lean concepts of 'muda', 'muri' and 'mura' all refer to different types of waste related to production such as unnecessary transportation, non-value adding activities and waiting time, as illustrated in Figure 1.

| | |
|------------------|---|
| Muda | Waste in the form of any activity that doesn't add value for the consumer but only consumes organizational resources. |
| Muri | Waste due to overburdening of workforce or equipment in the organization. |
| Mura | Waste due to unevenness or inconsistency in the use of workforce or equipment. |
| Kaizen | Continuous improvement without the need for new investments. |
| Poka-yoke | A system designed for detecting and preventing (human) errors. |
| Gemba | The real place, i.e. the factory floor or the place of action. |

Figure 1: Examples of Japanese Lean words

To improve and streamline organizational performance, all types of waste must all be identified and avoided to increase productivity, minimize costs and secure constant improvement. The identification of types of waste is a constant process in Lean Management. To identify potential waste in the design and production process, Lean principles further involve an increased focus on the customer. What is the customer actually willing to pay for? And equally important: What not?

“Lean production is lean because it uses less of everything compared with mass production – half the human effort in the factory, half the manufacturing space, half the investment in tools, half the engineering hours to develop a new product in half the time.”
(Womack et al., 1990: 13).

Lean language – branding fitness and action

In the modern management classic, *Lean Thinking* (Womack & Jones 1996), Womack explains that the choice of the term Lean was a conscious and strategic choice as the word ‘Lean’ connotes an interpretive framework of fitness, speed, and muscle tone. The term lean was first in used in the 1960s by the creator of Lotus sports cars, British Royal Air force engineer Colin Chapman, to characterize the optimal racing car. The discourse of Lean management stresses the parallel between the fast sports car and the fit organization in which the elimination of waste, i.e. excess organizational fat, is a key point. To survive in a competitive business environment, the organization must be trim, toned and fast on its feet.

Lean language and lean metaphors catch the spirit of the times and fit the Zeitgeist of postmodern Western culture in which a slim and fit body equals beauty, health and control. At an individual level, outside of a working context, a lifestyle similar to Lean principles is advocated in the media and several TV series on modern lifestyle and the importance of losing weight. Excess fat is socially unacceptable. Being fat - and not fit - equals lack of control and self discipline at both individual and organizational levels. The fact that Lean language is characterized by a series of metaphors and images related to fitness, health, beauty ideals and physical action makes it hard to express disagreement without being implicitly decoded as fat, unfit, unhealthy, unattractive and lazy. Organizations as well as individuals need to take action in order to become fit, lean and healthy.

The following quote from Lean management bestseller *The Toyota Way* (Liker, 2003) illustrates the action focus of Lean language and Lean management.

“We [Toyota Motor Corporation] place the highest value on *actual implementation and taking action*. There are many things one doesn’t understand and therefore, we ask them why don’t you *just go ahead and take action*; try to *do something* [...]. So by *constant improvement*, or, should I say, the improvement based on *action*, one can *rise* to the *higher* levels of practice and knowledge.” [Emphasis added].

Fujio Cho, President of Toyota Motor Corporation in Liker, 2003: 3.

Black belt masters? Branding Lean Six Sigma

In manufacturing companies, Lean is often combined with the related philosophy of Six Sigma and referred to as Lean Six Sigma. Both Lean and Six Sigma are concerned with identifying and eliminating waste and errors in order to increase efficiency and profits. Developed at Motorola in the 1980s, Six Sigma is a methodology that provides businesses with analytical tools to reduce waste by focusing on data collection and statistical evidence related to manufacturing processes. The statistical evidence provided by the Six Sigma methodology works hand in hand with key Lean principles to identify and eliminate waste and increase overall organizational performance. Thus Lean and Six Sigma are both concerned with identifying and eliminating waste and errors primarily in manufacturing industries.

Like Lean, Six Sigma has its own special terminology and favored images that serve a clear branding purpose and suggest an attractive interpretative framework for Six Sigma managers. While the key words of Lean is in exotic Japanese, Six Sigma language borrows terms from oriental martial arts to describe the different qualifications of Six Sigma managers who are classified according to a Judo-like system of belts. By referring to Six Sigma members as black belts, yellow belts, green belts etc., Six Sigma language establishes organizational hierarchy and indicates varying levels of professional expertise and authority in a framework of action and expertly trained kung fu fighters.

| | |
|--------------------------|---|
| Master black belt | The highest level of Six Sigma expertise; responsible for the complete implementation of Six Sigma: Statistical analysis, strategy and policy planning including the training and mentoring of Black Belts. |
| Black belt | A Six Sigma-trained professional who has completed an examination and has been certified in Six Sigma methods. |
| Green belt | A Six Sigma-trained professional who does not work on Six Sigma projects exclusively. |
| Yellow belt | The lowest level of expertise; applies to a professional who has a basic working knowledge of Six Sigma. |
| White belt | Introductory course. |

Figure 2: The Six Sigma belts (based on sixsigmaonline.org)

Lean and mean? – Some critical questions

Lean has become a brand and a buzz word that indicate innovation and businesses and organizations on the beat. Originally developed with manufacturing industries in mind, Lean is increasingly being implemented in service industries and in the public sector as a symbol of modern, cost-oriented management.

Critical studies of Lean (Arlbjørn, J. et al, 2008) have questioned whether or not it is meaningful or indeed possible to implement Lean outside of its original manufacturing context, for example in the public sector. Can caring for children, the elderly and the disabled exist in a framework of Lean management? Can hospitals be considered production units that need to maximize and streamline their flow?

The same study also questions whether or not Lean, in some instances, may actually block innovation processes, as the constant focus on minimizing slack and increasing efficiency leaves no time for experiments and thinking out of the box.

Other critical studies have questioned the ethics of Lean. The phrase ‘Lean and mean’ highlights the inherent stress factor of the demand for continuous improvement of work force efficiency, continuous evaluation and constant, on-going control to reduce manpower and resources (Mehri, 2006).

Opinions on the ‘correct’ definition of Lean and its applicability vary across business sectors. Consultants, researchers, trade unionists and workforce representatives have different interpretations of the Lean management brand. However, from a perspective of branding and communication, the language of Lean and Six Sigma provides an excellent illustration of a strategic and creative use of metaphors and codes that serve the purpose of branding Lean as innovation, action and progressive thinking – in spite of the fact that Lean is based on the early 19th century management principles of Scientific Management as it was applied in mass production.

References:

Arlbjørn, J.; Nørby, M.[ed.]; Norlyk, B.; Wiborg, K.; Holm, N., 2008: *Lean uden grænser?* [Limitless Lean?], Academica – et forlag i Gyldendal, Copenhagen.

Liker, J.K., 2004: *The Toyota Way: 14 Management Principles from the World’s Greatest Manufacturer*, McGraw-Hill, New York.

Mehri, D., 2006: The Darker Side of Lean. An Insiders Perspective on the Realities of the Toyota Production System, *Academy of Management Perspectives*, Vol. 20, No. 1, pp. 21-42.

Norlyk, B., 2009: Management discourse: Talking the power walk in organizational communication, *Language at work*, 2009.

Womack, J.P.; Jones, D.T., 1996: *Lean Thinking: Banish Waste and Create Wealth in Your Corporation*, Simon & Schuster, New York.

Womack, J.P.; Jones, D.T. & Roos, D. 1990: *The Machine that Changed the World*, Macmillan Publishing Company, New York.

Author



Birgitte Norlyk holds a PhD in organizational communication and organizational culture from The University of Southern Denmark. She also has a practical background in middle management. Her research encompasses studies of professional subcultures in organizations, organizational genres and intercultural communication. She has published books and articles in Danish and English on the interplay between discourse, culture, and power in various organizational settings.

This article was uploaded to <http://www.languageatwork.eu> in September of 2011 and published under a “Creative Commons license Attribution Non-commercial No derivatives (cc by-nc-sa)” for more information please go to: <http://creativecommons.org/about/license/>