Design Talk: Where Will Lean Take Us?

By Kevin Duggan

Medical device companies have achieved significant improvement using lean techniques. Improvements in quality, productivity, lead time, inventory, on-time delivery, and cost have been obtained and further improvement continues each day. However, there is one tough question about lean that seems yet to be unanswered, and that is, “Where will lean take medical device manufacturers?”

We’re taught lean is a journey of continuous improvement, a journey with no destination. However, the lean journey does have a destination, and a road map to get there as well. The destination is *Operational Excellence*, and this achieved by creating an environment where “each and every employee can see the flow of value to the customer, and fix that flow before it breaks down.” This means that operators themselves see abnormal flow and have standard work to correct it. The result is an operation designed to flow product to the customer, and when the flow is interrupted, it will ‘self-heal’ and resume without management. The impact of this on medical device manufacturers is not only having a robust quality and delivery system on highly shopisticated life or death products, but having an “immune system” in the production of these products.

With this type of “immune system” in place, medical device manufacturers won’t be chasing quality problems, parts, or suppliers, they will be spending time developing new products, breaking into new markets, and strategically thinking how to grow the business.

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