HOW TO GET OVER LEAN TRAUMA?

by Julie Savage-Fournier | *JSF Optimization*

We need to deal with the unfortunate situation: some people out there have Lean Trauma. Someone "did Lean to them" - this phrase was heard in Katacon7, I do not remember the speaker's name (I will be happy to give credit if someone claims the quote!). It put perfect words on something I encountered and could not name until now. Some people ran off with a few tools aiming for cost reduction and called in Lean. You come after them and must pick up what they left behind.

One social worker working with suicidal patient told me about the implementation of takt time in their service, it sounds like a joke but when it really happens, it is incredibly sad. Thanks to these types of initiatives, many healthcare unions took official stances against Lean practices in the province of Quebec. I am a Lean practitioner, working in healthcare, times were though. Fortunately, they were exposed to Lean done right over the years and the opposition melted.

As an engineer, I had all the tools to make the process right… But I realized there was some work to do on "resistance to change". It is what it was called then, I hope we can shift our mindset going forward. This phenomenon is not a defiant form of opposition for the sake of not changing… It is a combination of legitimate concerns based on previous experiences (that could have been extremely negative) and natural emotions during the change process.

I started being coached in positive parenting and non-violent communication (NVC) for raising my challenging children without shouting at them all the time. I did not like to be a yelling mom and needed another way to parent. I did not know it would change my way to work so much. These education principles are working throughout life, from childhood to adulthood. It does mix well with scientific thinking and can be compared to a Kata to learn and implement "respect for people".

I will share the things I changed and how it opened the door for more successful management and Lean practice. I do not pretend it is the only nor the best solution, but it worked for me.

A brief explanation of traumatic experiences for non-psychologists

People who had bad (or disastrous) previous experiences will come into your projects wary, suspicious, or even adversary. If the previous changes were traumatic, they may have to deal with *interfering thoughts*[1] and *triggers*[2]. It is important to understand there will be things in your project that will resonate to various degrees with their previous bad experience.

[1] Interfering thought: an unpleasant memory or idea that will keep someone from thinking about something else.
[2] Trigger : a reminder that will provoke experiencing a traumatic event all over again.

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The first thing to remember: there is nothing intentional in this behavior, it cannot be controlled without help and the emotions felt are real.

The second thing: the emotions may come out in a form that is inappropriate, that's usually what holding up emotions does.

We cannot deal with PTSD as continuous improvement professional (unless we have the clinical background to do so), we can empathize and refer kindly these people to the right kind of help. However, for the mild cases that cause negative reactions and manageable behaviors, we can adapt our interventions to alleviate anxiety and rebuild trust.

Stopping to address these emotions can unlock new possibilities in a project.

During the first Kaizen event I facilitated (a proper full week workshop with a month of measurement before), on the Wednesday, we started talking about moving the offices around to improve the workflow. One participant broke into tears, and we had to stop.

I called a break, and we had a chat. The last time the offices were moved, they went from an air-conditioned pavilion to one without air conditioning. It did not go well as they were not involved in the decision, it was poorly managed, and it felt overall like a punishment. Now we were talking of moving that team in an office in the middle of the new pavilion, in a place with only 1 window for 5 persons. The person

told me: "I know why we need to change the office and I understand it is necessary, but when I tell my team, they will want to kill me." At this point, we started discussing what would make the change acceptable to the team. We unlocked a project resulting in 250 000$/year of recurrent sav-

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ings with a discussion with the full team, a window AC unit donated by the hospital's foundation, and some paint to make the room brighter. Six months later, when I visited for a follow-up, everyone was happy in this new room and they were excited to show the other improvements they made to the space.

Not everyone will react strongly to changing from an office to another. And this is the illustration of trauma: the reaction was disproportionate to the actual situation because it was a recall of a previous really bad experience. As for everything, understanding the underlying causes helped unlock the situation.

Build a trusting climate: model the behavior you want to see.

That strategy is part of the "easy to understand, hard to practice" group. No matter what the rules are, what we say or what we put on paper, our actions will have more impact. If we write a goal on the whiteboard and never come back to check if it has been

achieved, it is only a handwritten piece of decoration. If we say a project is a priority, then refuse to allocate resources… You get the idea.

Why is this piece of advice so important? A keystone of psychological safety is trust. And trust is built over repeated interactions that confirms we are worthy of it; another word for that is coherence. When we "walk the talk", our words are worth more to our team than when we do not.

The other strong argument for this strategy is the way humans learn. We are hardwired to learn by repetition and by imitating others. You must do whatever you want the people around you to learn. Consistently.

Practical tips: Some types of behaviors to model in a continuous improvement project:

- Request feedback, react to it with positivity and demonstrate the will to do better, so people will be comfortable receiving feedback from you.
- Admit what you do not know and ask for explanations, so people will feel comfortable around you to ask questions and learn.

Be transparent, answer the tricky questions, admit your mistakes, this way people will be less likely to hide things from you.

- Thank people for their contribution and take the time to consider all ideas without judgement, this builds the right context for innovation and creativity.

Deal with strong emotions with the NVC routine: Observation, Feelings, Needs and Actions.

Unpleasant emotions get our brain in "fight-or-flight" mode (or for some people "fight-freeze-flight"), this is a fast brain mode that respond to danger automatically to preserve our survival. For most 21st century issues, we need to get back in thinking mode to find solutions.

Practicing this routine teaches to get ourselves backs in thinking mode faster and to help others follow the same way. We are designed to answer other's emotions with our own emotional response and getting ourselves out of this shortcut is the first skill to learn. Once we are safely back to thinking mode, we can start helping – it is like putting on your oxygen mask first on a plane.

At first, I could not do this 'live', so I was analyzing situations a posteriori to understand them. Over time, I built the capacity to incorporate it in direct interactions. It is still useful to analyze after the event because most of the time an immediate solution is not necessary. It can also be used to provide feedback, to teach or to discuss other ways the situation could have been handled.

Observation: it is what exists outside of us, objectively, these are the facts from the situation.

Feelings: it is what exists inside of us, subjectively, these all our interpretations, judgements, and emotions about the situation. They are caused by our needs relative to the situation, needs unmet will create unpleasant emotions and needs met will create pleasant emotions.

Needs: these are the universal human needs, however the intensity of each of them is dependent on each one's personality and previous experiences. By learning about ourselves and others, we get to know which need hides behind which emotion.

Actions: these are the solutions that come from the analysis, they are to be suggestions that the other person is free to accept or not. When your suggestion is not accepted, it is an opportunity to ask for the other person's suggestion.

Practical tips: to start practicing NVC:

- Find a list of emotions with more than 15 different emotions to learn the vocabulary and discover the nuances so you can identify them.
- In daily situations, practice making the difference between the facts and your feelings. It is hard at first because they are strongly connected.
- Find a list of human needs with more than 15 different needs to learn the vocabulary and discover the nuances so you can identify them.
- Start connecting the emotions and the needs, one situation can be the host of multiple emotions and multiple needs.
- "Can we talk about this together" is a great action suggestion for most situation when we start practicing. ■

To know more:

Books: "Speak peace in a world of conflict" and "Nonviolent Communication: A Language of Life" from Dr Marshall B. Rosenberg

Website: cnvc.org (you can find documentation and certified trainers there)

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