

Jim Collins Lives Lean.

May 2011 Newsletter

Key Takeaways

- ✳ Where do you spend your time? Tracking your own work diligently enables you to improve your own work processes and reduce waste.
- ✳ Get scientific. Figure out how you work and conduct experiments to improve it.
- ✳ Make a “stop-doing” list to accompany your to-do lists. Eliminate the bottom 20 percent of your list and abandon those projects.

It's pretty much impossible to find a company that doesn't have at least one of Jim Collins' books (*Built to Last*, *Good to Great*, *How the Mighty Fall*) in the CEO's office. What doesn't show up in his books, though, is the way in which Collins has taken core lean concepts and applied them to his life. An article about him in the *New York Times* is a reminder that continuous improvement doesn't have to be larded up with Japanese words and icons borrowed from Toyota to be lean.

Visual management? Check.

In a corner of the white board at the end of his conference room, Collins keeps this short list:

- Creative 53%
- Teaching 28%
- Other 19%

That, he explains, is a running tally of how he's spending his time, and whether he's sticking to a big goal he set for himself years ago: to spend 50 percent of his workdays on creative pursuits like research and writing books, 30 percent on teaching-related activities, and 20 percent on all the other things he has to do.

These aren't ballpark guesstimates. Collins keeps a stopwatch with three separate timers in his pocket at all times, stopping and starting them as he switches activities. Then he regularly logs the times into a spreadsheet.

Now, this kind of measurement may seem a bit anal, but if you think about Collins as a factory — one that makes ideas rather than engine blocks — it's really no different than what lean companies do on their production lines. They religiously track actual output against standards,

and when things go wrong, they try to figure out why. Although the article doesn't mention it, you can bet that if the percentages vary too much from the goal, he'd conduct a 5 Whys analysis to find the root cause.

Check out the way he approaches his "productive maintenance." He figures that he needs to get 70 to 75 hours of sleep every 10 days, and once went to a sleep lab to learn more about his own patterns. Now — surprise, surprise — he logs his time spent on a pillow, naps included, and monitors a rolling average. "If I start falling below that," he says, pointing to the short list on his whiteboard, "I can still teach and do 'other,' but I can't create."

What you've got here is a guy who's (okay, I'll admit it) uncomfortably intense compared to most people. But no more so than a company that's totally committed to creating a lean culture and organization. Building that kind of firm requires absolute, relentless, and complete commitment to efficiency — and Collins is what that looks like on an individual level. Reading this article, I was reminded again of Charles Fishman's profile of Toyota a few years back. He wrote,

Media accounts often report that a typical Toyota assembly line in the United States makes thousands of operational changes in the course of a single year. That number is not just large, it's arresting, it's mind-boggling. How much have you changed your work routine in the past decade? Toyota's line employees change the way they work dozens of times a year.

Most of us are focused exclusively on improving our *external* environment rather than ourselves. We draw value stream maps of various processes, lead kaizen events on individual lines, and set up white boards to track production. But how often do we track and improve our *own* work processes? As Fishman asks, how often do we change the way we work? I'm guessing that short of buying an iPhone in the past couple of years, you haven't done anything differently. You still conduct and attend crappy meetings. You still spend far too much time reading and deleting stupid, useless, email. You still suffer from too many interruptions. You still struggle to find the information you need quickly. You still spend too much effort on issues of little consequence.

Even if you have made a change in the way you work (like getting your shiny new iPhone), you probably didn't measure the effect of that change, which is the essence of the scientific method, and something that you always do on the factory floor. So how do you know if it was beneficial? Do you log your sleep, or your daily activities, like Collins does? Probably not.

One of Collins' tricks to eliminate waste is to start each year by choosing what not to do. Each of his to-do lists always includes "stop-doing" items. Collins believes that individuals and organizations absolutely must have a "stop-doing" project abandonment list to accompany their to-do lists. As a practical matter, he eliminates the bottom 20 percent of his list and abandons those projects. Forever. Think about it. You, no less than your company, are an engine of production. Why not apply lean to yourself?