

Lean Coaching without Resistance

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In this article, I investigate the use of **Solution Focus** and **Motivational Interviewing** to coach CEOs into starting their Lean initiative.

This paper originally appeared on Appreciating Systems (<http://www.appreciatingystems.com/>) under a series of 6 blog posts under title “How to begin #Lean coaching using #SolutionFocus and Motivational Interviewing” from September 2011 to March 2012. Some background material, otherwise accessible on the blog and elsewhere has been added to make this document as standalone as possible.

Keywords: change, coaching, dialogue, Lean, management, motivational interviewing, resistance, solution focus.

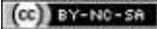
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1 Introduction

2% of Lean transformations are successful. That means that [98% of Lean transformations fail](#) (Google search).

Can you believe it? From an approach that stresses reflection (or *hansei*), it's more than surprising that almost nobody's looking for other ways to introduce Lean. I mean something that works better!

Actually, there are some people, for instance on the [Strength-Based Lean Six Sigma LinkedIn group](#), but we're few.

I would like here to express my ideas about introducing Lean differently to top management (or maybe other lower management levels) using Solution Focusⁱ and Motivational Interviewingⁱⁱ.

1.1 Who needs to change?

It's no news that most change initiatives fail because of lack of CEO involvement. Or so this is what change consultants say. But what did the consultant do to involve the CEO in the first place? Of course, CEOs are most used to directing others and hiring consultants to do the work on their behalf or on behalf of their own employees.

Yet, given the long trail of past consultants having worked in any company, one can wonder how making more of the same is supposed to be different?

So, I'm a firm believer that the first step of any Lean consultant is to assume the position of a coach and work with/on the CEO to:

- Identify what works in this organization to achieve changes (Solution Focus approach)
- Make the CEO realize that he's the one that needs changing and help him commit to that change (Motivational Interviewing approach).

Of course, there are other side effects of having the CEO do the work himself:

- Time invested in Lean is not time invested in other projects that would take time of employees out of Lean
- By showing up on the workplace (the *gemba*), people will stop what they're doing and start doing Lean instead
- By doing Lean himself, the CEO will learn Lean himself ("learning by doing" which is far more effective than learning by viewing slides)

1.2 The SF way to change: P>C>O

The Solution Focus way of change is summarized in the formula "P>C>O" which stands for Problem > Change needed > Outcome. I've mentioned this already [here](#). The tactics are to:

1. Make the client acknowledge that there is a Problem
2. Then, empathically suggest that there may be a need for Change
3. And then asking for the Outcome (in SF, we talk of a platform)

What's important here for me is that the context is as important as the questions above. Indeed, the client is already talking with a potential coach thereby implying that there *is* a problem. So the first question, despite being a bit rhetoric, is mainly useful for making the client talk about his situation and to have him express his view of it.

The second question start the process of making the client talk about the needed change and thus probes his place on the stages of changeⁱⁱⁱ.

The third question is a way to build the platform (move to more positive talk) and also a way for the coach to understand what kind of vision the client has in mind for his Lean implementation.

Obviously, the coach has a rather clear vision of what Lean could mean for that kind of organization, but the CEO's vision is more important with respect to this. Where too much of a discrepancy would exist between mainstream Lean and the CEO's vision, the coach could probe for that discrepancy.

1.3 The Motivational Interviewing way of change: DARN-C

In [Motivational Interviewing](#), the coach monitors the client's moves on the stages of change by looking for and eliciting DARN-C talk:

- **Desire** for change
- **Ability** to change
- **Reason** for changing
- **Need** for change
- and **Commitment** to change

More importantly, the MI coach never pushes the client into change, but rather raises the discrepancy between the current situation and its drawbacks, and some possible, better, future situation. Then the client is left to decide whether s/he wants to change... or not!

The rest of this paper will explore the different stages of change considered during a Motivational Interviewing intervention, and how a mix of Solution Focus and Motivational Interviewing questions can hopefully help a client decide that s/he need to change for Lean to become a reality in his/her organization.

2 Pre-contemplation stage

2.1 Background on pre-contemplation

This stage of change corresponds to a mental state of *someone who is not considering change*, whether he has not thought about it yet or that he doesn't feel like he's the one who needs to change.

For an MI coach, the most important tasks during this stage are to:

- Build rapport and trust
- And increase problem awareness to raise a sense of importance to the change

Special note: when considering imposed change (some upper level of management imposing a change for instance), it may be first difficult to work with the client because this kind of situation just

triggers resistance. What have been found useful in other contexts is, rather than work directly with the requested change, work on the constraint instead: *“I understand you’re not the one that asked for that change. Yet, you now have a new duty to assume, in addition to the other ones you already had. Would it be ok for you if we look at what could be done to alleviate this constraint?”*

2.2 Pre-contemplation of behavior change toward Lean

Back to a Lean starting initiative context, during this stage the CEO may not be aware that what he’s viewing on the *gemba* reflects his own way of thinking and that of the organizational culture of his company.

Building rapport and increasing problem awareness are the more important tasks of the coach at this stage. *But the problem has to be formulated as one of the CEO behavior, not one related to other people in the organization!*

With this in mind, here are some tentative questions, MI-style, to ask a CEO considering Lean:

- *Why do you want your organization to go Lean?*
- *How would it be better if your organization implemented Lean management? What else?*
- *How important (from 1 to 10) is it for you to move your organization to Lean management?*
- *I understand you want the situation to be changed and your organization to become “leaner”. Tell me about a successful organizational change you have been leading. What made it possible?*
- *How did you manage to lead it to success?*
- *How is your current Lean initiative going? What works? How did you manage to achieve this?*
- *Tell me about your current management practices.*
- *When comparing your previous change successes to your current Lean initiative, what’s different?*
- *Suppose you did change your management practices, how would that help you? The organization? What would be the first thing others would see you doing differently?*

What needs to be kept in mind by the Lean coach is that the aim of these questions is to get the CEO moving from pre-contemplation to contemplation stage at which moment, he will be considering change for himself.

3 Contemplation stage

3.1 Background on contemplation

This stage of change corresponds to a mental state of someone who *is considering* change, but may not know what the change corresponds to and is still undecided as to going for it or not.

For a MI coach, the most important tasks during this stage are to:

- acknowledge ambivalence and mixed feelings about the change,
- explore discrepancy between present behavior and personal values or goals,
- discuss pros and cons of change,
- talk about ways to experiment with the change.

3.2 Contemplation of behavior change toward Lean

Previously, the CEO did not know that he was the one that needed to change. If the coach succeeded in having him move to contemplating the change of his own behaviors, the CEO should now be more opened to changing himself. Yet, a commitment still needs to be gained for doing the change.

Just as previously, the coach's role is still to increase DARN-C talk, but with a more pressing focus on C talk (commitment), which would signal the CEO moved to the next stage of Preparation.

With this in mind, here are some tentative questions, MI-style, to ask a CEO contemplating changing for some more Lean behaviors:

- *Tell me about your current management practices. How have they helped you achieving your goals in the past? Hindered?*
- *To what extent does the organization currently mirrors your management practices?*
- *When comparing your previous change successes to your current Lean initiative, what's different?*
- *How do you relate your previous management practices to that of a Lean manager (always on gemba, challenging yet listening to collaborators, coaching rather than solving problems, etc.)?*
- *How do you see your current management practices evolving to suit with a continuous improvement culture as proposed by Lean?*
- *Tell me how you feel about changing your management behaviors? What would happen if you'd stay the same? If you changed?*
- *Suppose you did change your management practices to fit Lean practices, how would that help you? The organization?*
- *Supposing you'd like to try some new management behaviors (but the final choice stays yours), what would the first of them be (with respect to Lean, of course)? Where would you like to experiment them? By when? What consequences would you expect?*
- *On a scale from 1 to 10, how important is it for you to change? Why not a lower number? What else?*
- *On a scale from 1 to 10, how ready are you for making the change? Why not a lower number? What else?*
- *What would you need to be done to move to an upper number on the readiness scale?*

What needs to be kept in mind by the Lean coach is that the aim of these questions is to get the CEO moving from pre-contemplation stage to contemplation at which moment, he will be considering change.

The coach needs to listen carefully to the CEO talk and, through the use of OARS techniques (see Motivational Interviewingⁱⁱ: **Open-ended questions**, **Affirmations** of any positive talk or behavior, **Reflecting** what's been said and **Summarizing**), pin-points the **Commitment** talk of the CEO. Then it will be time, during another session, to Prepare for the change.

4 Preparation stage

4.1 Background on preparation

Following the preceding stages of change, if you're reading this, it would mean that your CEO is now *committed to change himself*. Most CEOs know their organization need to change to implement Lean, but they usually don't expect to change themselves. Yet, *if they continue to do what they've always done, they'll get what they always had*.

So, the most critical part before being allowed to the **preparation** stage is that the CEO expressed Commitment to change talk, following MI questions aiming at raising DARN-C talk (Desire, Ability, Reasons, Need and Commitment). That was the purpose of the preceding questions.

So, the CEO being now committed to change himself, the most important tasks during this stage for the MI coach are to:

- build confidence in the change to come
- talk about timing of change
- present information, options and advice

All the while

- resisting the urge to push, by staying at the client's place (or pace)

4.2 Lean role of CEO

This stage of change differs from preceding ones in that the CEO is expected to build an action plan for the change. There are two possibilities with that:

1. either he knows how to "behave Lean"
2. or he doesn't

There are two responses to these situations, non exclusives and not related specifically to #1 or #2:

- comfort him that he knows how to do it
- teach him what he doesn't know...

With that second point, it's important to notice we're still trying to avoid raising his resistance to the change, so any advice or teaching need either:

- be formally requested by him
- or gently introduced and asked for permission to tell *before telling*: "I know a way to achieve that. Would you like me to present it?" It's also important to note that we're not behaving as having a definitive knowledge or advice: we want the CEO to adapt what we say to his specific organization and management style, and make it his own.

It is now important to recall that Lean is mostly about empowering collaborators to spot problems and imagine solutions that they implement, measure and generalize (standardize in Lean terms) where appropriate, with maximum stakeholders implication. This is basic PDCA and scientific method.

We certainly don't want the CEO to solve problems on behalf of employees, for that would prevent them from learning (and he probably doesn't have time for that anyway).

Simply put, the role of a Lean CEO is to coach, on the gemba, his middle managers into coaching, on the gemba, their employees into the scientific method (PDCA) in order to move current processes to a vision of one-piece-flow.

Important note:

The purpose of this article is not to detail how to do that one-piece-flow (they are shelves full of literature on that topic). Suffice it to say that, for instance, [D. Jones and J. Womack's "Lean Thinking"](#) approach is useful to keep in mind:

- identify value
- identify value-stream
- create flow
- pull
- aim for perfection

And the two tactics to get there are:

- just-in-time
- and *jidoka* (autonomation or automation with a human touch)

What we would like to stress here is that the method to achieve the previous habit of continuously improving process (the "Improvement Kata") is through management (including the CEO!) applying what's been named the "Coaching Kata" by Mike Rother in his "[Toyota Kata](#)" book ([some free material is available here](#), including material on the two katas).

Our purpose is to get the CEO to decide to change himself into adopting the Coaching Kata, or anything similar that works for him.

4.3 Preparation of behavior change toward Lean

So, the main strategy of the coach will be to help the CEO identify what behaviors he needs to adopt in order for his people (middle management) to do what he wants them to do in order to do Lean. The *what* are: continuously, improve, respect and people. The *how* is *what works for the CEO*. So, most of the following questions are Solution Focused oriented on that purpose.

With this in mind, here are some tentative questions, MI-style, to ask a CEO preparing his own change for some more Lean behaviors (be reminded that it's always possible to mentor the CEO into Lean knowledge, provided he asks for it or gives you permission to do so – what we want is genuine interest in continuous improvement: Lean tools are only shortcuts to be used where, when and if people want to use them):

- *Recalling preceding transformations/projects you managed successfully, what worked well in terms of your own behaviors for having them move on?*
- *How do these compare to your current management practices?*
- *What first steps would you see yourself doing first? Can you make these smaller? And even smaller? And, of these last ones, what even smaller step could you start doing right now?*
- *What other behavior will you start doing tomorrow? What else?*

- *What else?*
- *What will you see improve as a result? What else?*
- *What is the place in your organization where continuous improvement would benefit more as a starter? What's been your behavior toward it recently? How would you go about changing it? How will you measure results?*
- *Suppose a miracle open overnight (without you knowing it since you were sleeping) and all middle-management would adopt Lean behaviors: how would you know in the morning that things have changed? What would you notice first? What would you do to support it?*
- *On a scale from 1 to 10, how would you rate your current management practices regarding continuous improvement? Why not a lesser number? What are you doing that makes you give this score? What else?*
- *On a scale from 1 to 10, how important is it for you to change your own behavior? Why not a lower number? What else?*
- *On a scale from 1 to 10, how ready are you to starting implementing your new behaviors? Why not a lower number? What else?*

5 Action stage

5.1 Background on Action

In the preceding stages of change, you first developed an understanding in the CEO's mind that someone had to change and that it was him. Then you helped him (or her!) prepare for the change (see [previous article on preparation](#)). Now, the change is ongoing and you need to support the CEO during the Action stage of change.

During this stage, the role of the coach is to support the CEO in achieving whatever goal he set for him or herself by:

- offering planning assistance
- supporting and encouraging his or her efforts to change
- helping to develop reachable goals and monitoring progress

And without forgetting the next stage:

- helping develop plans to maintain the new behaviors over time

5.2 Action for a behavior change toward Lean

In the previous stage (preparation), the CEO developed a plan to embody new behaviors aimed at sustaining continuous improvement (*kaizen*) from the organization's employees. This is what needs to be supported during the current stage.

Contrary to previous stages where things didn't move yet, there should be some results by now and your purpose will be to identify and amplify them. Coming back to the OSKAR coaching framework of Solution Focus ([here on SF Work](#) or [here on AI Commons](#)), I propose some questions below.

Concerning the current action plan:

- *What have you done/changed (in your own behavior)?*

- *How did you manage to achieve it?*
- *What have you noticed is better in your organization as a result of your own changes, with respect to moving your organization toward Lean (flow, stop at defects, empowerment, respect for people, etc.)?*
- *What else?*
- *What have you discovered that supports you in your own change?*
- *What else?*
- *What would your employees say you are doing well? Maybe: What have they already noticed and told you? Or: how do you know they know?*
- *What else?*
- *What, in your organization, do you think will change next? How will you support it?*
- *On a scale from 0 (no Lean behavior at all) to 10 (perfect Lean sensei), how do you rate your Lean behaviors up to now?*
- *What is working well already that has given you the confidence to rate it at the rate you gave earlier? What else? (Before moving forward into the future, we need to reflect about what is good and useful now. Question courtesy of [David Shaked](#) – Thanks!)*
- *What behaviors of yours would you need implemented to raise one level up on the scale?*
- *How will you know you've achieved it?*
- *What makes you positive about being able to make that next change? What resources can you tap into to make it happen?*
- *What is your next smallest step to do toward that higher level?*

Concerning sustaining the changed behaviors in the future:

- *What helped you achieve the changes up to now?*
- *What would you like to do to help maintain these changes (and corresponding results) in the future?*
- *What do you see can help you in sustaining the changes?*
- *What smallest step can you do right away toward helping sustain the changes?*

As usual with Motivational Interviewing, practice **OARS**: **O**pen-ended questions, **A**ffirm positive talk & behaviors (these are already embedded in the proposed questions above), **R**eflect what's said (emphasizing success) and **S**ummarize often.

5.3 Note regarding Lean change and Stages of Change

The [Stages of Change](#) model is one where there's a beginning and an end to the change. The last steps of the model deal with the inevitable relapses and plans to prevent or overcome them.

Lean is a journey, not a destination. As a consequence, a Lean manager is always learning and there's no end to that. So isn't there any end to the change plan. This needs to be addressed by the coach and the CEO: at some time, the coach will need to assess whether the CEO can be let on his own more often and thus taper off the coaching. As is said in [TWI Job Instruction](#): the coach needs to help until he knows the CEO knows what to do and how to do it.

6 Maintenance & Relapse

6.1 Background on Maintenance and Relapse

During the last episode, we've seen how to help the CEO sustain his Action stage mainly by making him reflect on the results he got and on how he planned to continue to improve.

Of course, Lean is a journey, not an end in itself. So there's no final learning on the part of the CEO. Yet, when it comes to his behavior, there are some new ones that must be put in place and maintained once he found that they worked (meaning they induced continuous improvement initiatives and thriving from the employees). Occasionally, the manager could fall back into relapse. The coach must then know how to help him get back on track to what worked well. Here's how.

During this stage, the role of the coach is to support the CEO in maintaining his own successful behaviors by:

- supporting and encouraging the behavior changes already done
- talking about possible trouble spots and developing plans to manage relapse triggers

Of course, in case of relapse (falling back in command & control mode, telling what to do (giving solutions), forgetting to following-through with improvements, etc.), the coach has a clear role to play as well:

- addressing the relapse, but without adding to the feeling of shame that could exist
- assessing and discussing what went wrong and remembering what worked well instead, to reuse that

6.2 Maintenance

By now, the CEO should have clearly identified what works for him in modeling Lean behaviors that foster employee thriving and continuous improvement. So, what's important is that the coach supports him and help him put in place triggers to detect relapse and take action should this occur. I propose some questions below in the Motivational Interviewing and Solution Focus way used in the preceding posts of the [series](#).

- *Things seem to be running almost by themselves now. What are you doing that allows that? What else?*
- *How did you manage to get there (show the current successful behaviors) despite the rest of the organization not initially being supportive? [develop his sense of autonomy]*
- *What have you learn about yourself? What else? [develop his sense of competence]*
- *What do your current behaviors bring to management and to the employees? What pleases them? What else?*
- *What are the results from the customers' points of view? From the stakeholders?*
- *How did you manage to achieve all of these? What else? What else?*
- *How do you feel?*

Preparing for relapse:

- *Old habits die hard: have you witnessed yourself falling back already? How did you notice? How did you felt about it? How did you manage to get back on the train? How did you felt then?*
- *What else?*
- *What positive effect had your getting back on track with Lean behaviors on the employees? How did they helped/supported you? What else?*
- *On a scale from 0 (no confidence) to 10 (totally confident), how do you rate your confidence in maintaining your effective Lean behaviors in the future? How come such a number? Why not a lower number? What strengths do you have that support your maintaining your Lean behaviors? What small step do you see yourself doing tomorrow to start moving to the next level on the scale? What else?*

As usual with Motivational Interviewing, practice OARS: Open-ended questions, Affirm positive talk & behaviors (these are already embedded in the proposed questions above), Reflect what's said (emphasizing success) and Summarize often.

6.3 Relapse

First of all, it's important to stress that relapse is unavoidable. It happens, this is normal, and things can be done. During the maintenance dialogues above, some tokens were identified that support the CEO into his Lean behaviors and to get back on track should he had fallen off the train. Still, the CEO may wish to see the coach because some things aren't going as expected, or the coach may witness some regress during one of the visit.

Motivational Interviewing addresses these situations by digging into the problem and trying to understand it. Since we're trying to make use of Solution Focus at the same time, we're introducing a twist here by building again a platform and helping the CEO re-imagine his Future Perfect, and then help him identify what works that he can re-use to get back on the Lean train.

Here are some proposal questions:

- *I noticed that some things weren't as your showed them to me last time. What happened? How do you link the situation to your own behavior?*
- *What would you want the situation to be instead? What would that mean for your corresponding behaviors?*
- *How did you managed to demonstrate these behaviors in the past? What worked in the past to sustain the behaviors despite the environment?*
- *Aside from the current problem, what's working? What's giving you hope for the future? How do you manage to sustain these other aspects? How could that help you get back to your preferred future as far as the problem is concerned?*
- *On a scale from 0 (inappropriate Lean behavior) to 10 (ideal Lean behavior you'd like to demonstrate with respect to the current relapse), where are you now? What helped you not fall down a lower number? What else? What small step will you make tomorrow to start moving to N+1? What else?*
- *How will you see you're back on train?*

7 Conclusion

Here we are. In this [series](#) of articles I tried to address the necessary change of behavior a CEO should demonstrate to move from his current behaviors (at the source of the current situation of his organization) to Lean behaviors more appropriate for an organization embodying Lean:

- thriving management and employees,
- exhilarating service to customers,
- and delighted stakeholders.

I proposed to introduce the necessary changes by making use of:

- **Motivational Interviewing**: a way to dialogue with someone to as to make him or her move through some stages of change without any raising of habitual “change resistance”. This is done by raising awareness in the coachee that he is autonomous in his decision to change or not, he is indeed competent in doing the change and by installing a sense of relatedness between the coach and the coachee where the coach models prosocial behaviors and embodies a posture (behaviors) that can be replicated by the CEO toward his employees. Five strategies are used for that purpose: 1) expressing empathy, 2) developing discrepancy between what the CEO wants and where he is, 3) avoiding any argumentation and 4) rolling with resistance and finally 5) supporting self-efficacy of the CEO.
- **Solution Focus**: a change approach that builds a platform out of a problematic situation, based on what works nonetheless. Then the coachees are encouraged to envision a Preferred Future. Then, the coach helps the coachee identify tokens that support his already working behaviors and the smallest possible steps that could be taken immediately to improve the situation toward the vision.

I hope I have been clear enough in my description of this endeavor. Any experiment you might make with this proposed approach, I'd be delighted to know what happened and what worked. Feel free to contact me by leaving a comment below or through any of my social entry points at [my Google Profile](#).

I am deeply indebted to [David Shaked](#) for his kind help and support in helping me improve my ideas regarding the application of strength-based ideas to Lean, and [Coert Visser](#) for his clear explanations regarding Solution Focus. Thanks a lot!

ⁱ **Solution Focus** is an approach to change where an inquiry is made into times when the problem has been absent or less present and what made the situation that way. Then means are devised to make more of these working solutions. More about SF can be read here: <http://www.appreciationsystems.com/solution-focus/>

ⁱⁱ **Motivation Interviewing** is a collaborative, person-centered form of guiding to elicit and strengthen motivation for change.

ⁱⁱⁱ **Stages of Changes** have been described in the “transtheoretical model” as the different steps a person is going when she need a change. More about it here: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Transtheoretical_model