

Trim the fat from your business

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Is your business a bloated beast struggling to stay upright in the current economic climate?

With the petrol price going up, load shedding scheduled for all provinces across South Africa and the uncertain rand-dollar exchange, businesses need to be sure they are ready for the bumpy economic road ahead.

"This is not the time to think up grand strategies but to look at how businesses operate at their core and whether they are in fact ready to cope," explains Fortune Gamanya, course convenor of the Lean Leadership Programme at the University of Cape Town Graduate School of Business (GSB). "When times are tough, a lean philosophy can make a huge difference to how a business performs," she says.

The programme is based on the principles of leadership as exemplified by the successful Japanese automotive giant Toyota. While the Toyota Way may consist of simple concepts that are easy to grasp - like the importance of a daily 15-minute meeting - implementing them and putting them into practice is a more complex than the concepts sound. Gamanya says that this is where the programme is especially useful as it encourages participants to find contextual solutions that work for their environment.

"In large organisations we often find executive teams sitting down to come up with a strategy, which then goes down to middle management with instructions on implementation. These strategies cannot be translated into action if there is a disconnect between the way the actual work is carried out on the floor and the plan. Executives ought to have a clear understanding of how value is delivered to the customer before coming up with a plan that might impact on the delivery of that value, as well as disempower the person delivering the value. The best people to come up with improvement solutions are the people doing the actual work," says Gamanya.

Lean Leadership teaches people a different way of thinking and doing things. It explores what leadership is and how systems operate, teaching people to really look at how their organisation operates and how it could be managed more efficiently.

Kumeshnee West, Senior Manager of Executive Education at the GSB adds, "At the UCT GSB we place a lot of value on developing leaders for our emerging market context. We want to develop leaders from the bottom all the way to the top."

Gamanya says teaching people to look differently at their role and the way team members function is key. "We had one participant, who worked in the mining sector. Just by implementing one aspect of lean which happens to be the foundation of Lean, he was able to save his company \$25,000."

She adds, "An organisation that has gone through a lean transformation has gone through a culture change. It is a different way of managing your business, an empowering culture, a way of looking at value from the perspective of the customer and allocating your resources as such. Lean is not cost-cutting process, which is a common misconception. Lean is about a different focus. The focus is on eliminating anything in the system that does not add value.

"The idea is not for people to study the Toyota Way and cut and paste it into their own working environment. It's about looking at the philosophy that is at the centre of Toyota's success and see how that can apply in your business. It is about defining value from the perspective of the customer, respect and a relentless search for a better way of creating that value."

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