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Elizabeth F. Turesky
University of Southern Maine

Patrick Connell
Nichols Portland, LLC

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Linking Theory & Practice

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Elizabeth F. Turesky[1] and Patrick Connell[2]

[1]*Leadership and Organizational Studies, University of Southern Maine, Lewiston-Auburn College, Lewiston, Maine, USA;* [2]*Fuel/Fluid Power Products, Nichols Portland, Portland, Maine, USA*

Correspondence:
Elizabeth F. Turesky, Leadership and Organizational Studies, University of Southern Maine, Lewiston-Auburn College, 51 Westminster Street, Lewiston, Maine 04240, USA.
Tel: (207) 753-6066;
E-mail: eturesky@usm.maine.edu

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As we read through the case study of Ariens, we could see many similarities to the lean implementation effort that we have observed at Environs. This has led us to be both impressed by Ariens success story and also skeptical of its continued improvement. The reason we are skeptical is if the Environs study had been completed 4 years earlier, it would have appeared that Environs was doing most things well. Another reason for suspicion about the positive story is the length of time that the authors of the case actually spent on-site at Ariens. We have no doubt that if so little time had been spent at Environs, many things would not have been seen either, particularly before 2006.

One of the big contrasts between the two studies is that Ariens is selling a completed product while Environs manufactures components. This difference is critical in understanding impediments to change. Ariens decided to become lean because it had high inventory, a compensation system that rewarded employees based on overproduction, and a dealer network that priced their product above similar goods in the market-place. In contrast, at Environs, its customers virtually impelled the move to lean.

Both Ariens and Environs did many things the same or similarly. Both Environs and Ariens initially looked for easy victories to add credibility to lean. Consultants were hired at both companies to initially guide the changes. At Ariens, employees were trained in lean principles and practices just as they were at Environs. However unlike at Environs, and in an effort to create organization-wide alignment, lean practices and principles were implemented beyond the boundaries of manufacturing at Ariens. Even though many workers in both companies were resistant to change, believing that lean was just another program that would go away, there were more employees who believed in lean. Both organizations involved many employees in lean projects. At Environs, a volunteer list was made and there were always more on the list than could be placed in projects, attesting to employee interest in lean projects. Although Environs is not doing well presently, lean is far from forgotten: its employees understand that they need to be lean. Unfortunately, the execution of lean has not been effective over the last few years.

One last thought after reading the Ariens case is that if a company is going to have lasting results with lean, it needs to implement the whole package. If even one element such as a shared vision is missing, then the overall effectiveness of the implementation will lose steam. The economic downswing, the lack of commitment from new leadership, and shortfall in a lean culture transformation at Environs were significant factors that eroded the sustainability of lean implementation. A company must lay a solid foundation of lean practices and principles, thoroughly prepare and plan, empower employees to implement the lean changes, engage in organizational learning processes, and then persistently sustain the improvements through shared, visible and committed leadership.

We hope that Ariens will continue to make competitive gains by using lean tools. At the same time, we hope that Environs renews its focus on lean to enjoy once again consistent profitability and stable employment for its workers.