

Well-Known Pharmaceutical Company Uses Lateral Thinking Tools to Power Idea Generation in Kaizen Initiative



by de Bono Thinking Systems Distributor, de Bono Consulting

Jeffrey Wallk, now Managing Partner with The Value Enablement Group, was an Enterprise Architect at the time this story took place. His company was using the Kaizen method for process improvement and Jeffrey, a certified Lateral Thinking trainer and facilitator, realized that the Lateral Thinking tools could address several needs that the use of Kaizen uncovered.

“We began with the intention of helping key managers develop the business case for the value their teams were contributing to our company. Our Innovation Center team felt that a program blending Kaizen and Lateral Thinking methodologies could prove that the teams were engaged in constantly increasing their value while lowering their costs—and that they were getting results. We also expected this move to strengthen a competency across the organization for driving continuous and stepwise improvement,” Jeffrey explains.

Fundamental to the Kaizen method is placing the responsibility for idea generation on those closest to the process—in this case staff members involved in R & D / product development. Jeffrey knew that the Lateral Thinking tools could help staff come up with more and better ideas around any focus area.

Employees were taught the Kaizen method along with selected Lateral Thinking tools that Jeffrey felt would provide the most leverage: initial core dump of ideas, followed by Random Entry, and finishing up with Challenge and Provocation to reach more diverse thinking for transformational ideas.

The results were significant in that the team generated some 200 ideas covering 30 concepts using a total time commitment of less than 3 hours.

Note: The efficiency of the Lateral Tools was not lost on the Kaizen master or on the senior managers.

The team then reviewed all of the ideas and placed them in "do-ability" buckets to slot them by priority:

- Short Term – implement in 1-2 weeks
- Mid Term – implement in 1-2 months
- Long Term – beyond 2 months

The senior members of the team then leveraged their domain knowledge to identify which opportunities were best suited to achieve their objectives. The combined Kaizen & Lateral Thinking exercise yielded a 50% projected reduction in cycle time. Many of the short-term ideas were implemented within a week (as there were no resource requirements associated with these and they were easy to implement). The team was able to demonstrate improvement in a number of areas throughout the product development lifecycle.

Jeffrey was also able to identify some missing pieces of the puzzle that would need to be found in order to reap the maximum potential from their blended Kaizen-Lateral Thinking tool kit:

1. Lateral Thinking produces a wide range of ideas, some of which may lead to disruptive innovation. These ideas must be captured and funneled into a process for further assessment, planning, and potential implementation.
2. A plan for assessing ideas and aligning ideas to address desired customer outcomes.
3. A process for prioritizing ideas to ensure there is an appropriate blend of balancing short-term needs (outcomes) while lining up investments (bigger ideas) to address long-term needs (outcomes).
4. A capability for building value-driven business cases will ensure that the bigger ideas are addressing highly unmet needs of customers. This will also help align the necessary support to engage in strategic experiments to move these ideas forward while managing risk and investments with care.
5. And new approaches for encouraging an open mindset where these experiments can move forward so that the bigger ideas get transitioned into the execution pipeline.

Ultimately Jeffrey was so encouraged by the results of this experience and others that he had while involved with the Innovation Center that he saw the possibilities of applying these combined techniques in other organizations. To pursue this goal, Jeffrey recently has established his own consulting firm.

“By successfully combining Lateral Thinking with Kaizen, I was able to extend the Kaizen model to deliver improvements along several dimensions. In retrospect, Lateral Thinking has provided me with a launch pad for pursuing my own ideas and moving my career 'Vertically' forward,” Jeffrey observed.

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