

We need to think about redefining work. Until we — anyone who wishes to bring about organizational change — redefine our business' actual value-creating work, we haven't made any meaningful changes. You may be able to create wealth through a variety of business models or ways of thinking. But if you want to create real value and jobs that value people, you must think hard about how your people are working every day. That's because the essence of lean thinking is about the work. Lean thinking and practice means working on the work: the value-creating work that occurs on the frontlines of your enterprise.

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If you want me as your employee to give you my heart and soul, then consider whether the work is menial or meaningful. Will I do that if the relationship we have is one of a mere monetary transaction? There's nothing morally wrong with a purely transactional relationship if that's our mutual agreement. But if you want me and each person in your organization to fully commit, we need to be aligned on purpose and aligned on why we are here, on what we are trying to accomplish. Then, I can focus — applying all my humanity — on the work in front of me, the work at hand.

I am outraged at the comments I hear so prevalently nowadays: "We know how to do the work. We just need to change our culture." Or, "We know the lean tools, we want the lean culture." Or any assumption that people can become engaged in continuous improvement as a training exercise. This way of thinking is all-too-often paired with vague claims that "Oh, we engage our people. People are the most important part of the process. We just turn them loose, and they take ownership of their own work."

Really? Your people decided that the coffee shop is located above the subway station and needs to open every day at 5:00 a.m.? They decided to be the only trauma center within 200 miles? They chose to construct the new building in a swamp? They determined that their worth is \$20 per hour?

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Each person comes to work every day and does a job. In an office, on an assembly line. In the C-suite, at the reception desk. Out on a construction site, in a cube farm. Doing heart surgery, brewing coffee. Lean thinking asks: What IS the work? And what is *care and feeding* of that work? Who does that care and feeding? How? So let's not fool ourselves and each other with talk of "meaningful work." Of "our people are our most valuable resource." Of "respect for people." We cannot have this conversation without a deep respect for both the people and the work itself.

Is your work menial or meaningful? How about both? It's okay for meaningful work to appear menial. Most of most workdays consist of exactly that, no matter how glamorous it may look from the outside. Talk to a surgeon at the end of her long day in the operating room. Is it *good work*?

Unfortunately, many purported advocates of meaningful work are the quickest to demean labor, such as working on the assembly line. Note the underlying assumption of the common observation, "That job is like working on an assembly line."

If the assembly line is demeaning, then let's get rid of it. You, then, Ms. Consumer, can pick up the price tag and pay the penalty of poor quality that will come from people trying to hand-build — which is mainly, you know, a [process](#) full of rework in the name of craftsmanship: "Let me shave off just a little more here, oh, too much, now I'll have to shave off some more over here."

I'm not saying craftsmanship isn't real. I'm saying that if it is real and a good thing, then let's elevate all work to that level and give it the respect it deserves.

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Making things is, in its essential nature, a meaningful thing. It is among the most meaningful of the many ways we humans can choose to fill our time. Factory work — whether a job shop or an assembly line, carving picture frames, or fabricating steering brackets — is a way to organize ourselves to make things. It is immensely rewarding, meaningful work. Or it can be if we choose.

So, let's make it so. Let's elevate the work. Celebrate it. And, with that, let's treat it — the work — with the deep respect it deserves. That applies to the "lowly" receptionist. Or the more respected surgeon. Or a street sweeper.

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Lean thinking is about, more than anything else, rethinking, reimagining what work can be. To do so, we have to start with the purpose of the work. We ask, “Why are we doing this. What problem are we trying to solve?” You, as the owner or CEO, have a problem you are trying to solve, which has brought you to this position of gathering together dozens or thousands of individuals on a daily basis to do this work, to create this value together.

I recently had the dispiriting experience of walking the [gemba](#) with a young entrepreneur, a [Lean Startup](#) aficionado, who explained to me how his system design was perfect. His only problem was that he couldn’t get good workers who would operate it properly. I couldn’t believe my ears. Pressing him, he emphasized, “No, we just can’t get good workers around here.”

It was a picking [operation](#). Many items were out of place because the pickers would sometimes mistakenly pick the wrong part, then set it back in an incorrect location.

We walked and talked, and I left his [gemba](#) with a profound sense of personal failure that I could not find the words to show him an alternative way to think about his situation. He actually thought he had the perfect business system, one he was confident would soon (and probably will) bring him great wealth (despite, by the way, the horrible customer service); his problem was bad workers.

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Contrast that with this. Build your business *from* the work. Define the work based on the value you will provide the customer, on the work to be done to solve the customer’s problem. Build the work (the business) from there so that whoever (I intentionally avoid here the word that makes so many uncomfortable: “the worker”) is doing the work can do it perfectly every time. When a customer asks for his favorite beverage, the barista knows how to do the work to provide it. And when the inevitable problem arises — “Oh, more customers than we’ve ever had at this time of day!” — he/she knows what to do and how to do it:

1. Observe that there is a problem.

2. Devise a quick response to make the immediate situation better.
3. Come up with some ideas for making the situation better next time.
4. Try those ideas and judge how well they worked.

And, here's the kicker, the real reward: he/she knows that while that particular problem will not occur again, he/she is completely comfortable knowing that another problem, a different problem, absolutely *will* occur — probably very soon — and can say, "It's okay, I will deal with each situation as it arises, as a new challenge to keep making things better and better."

And here's an even bigger kicker: rather than wait on the next problem, he/she will create it! By learning to see "problems" merely as "gaps" between the way things are now versus the way they should or could be, we can start to see every situation as a problem waiting to be solved. For example, when the barista fine-tunes the size of batches of brewed coffee, or does away with batches entirely by going to a pour-over method for each cup, or challenges the team to respond even more quickly when lines begin to form during peak times of the day. Problems no longer reside in the realm of things that happen to us; they are improvements-in-waiting, gaps we can tackle as part and parcel of doing our regular work.

Back to that street sweeper, consider this by Martin Luther King:

If a man is called to be a street sweeper, he should sweep streets even as a Michelangelo painted, or Beethoven composed music or Shakespeare wrote poetry. He should sweep streets so well that all the hosts of heaven and earth will pause to say, "Here lived a great street sweeper who did his job well."

So, this ideal — "Let's make work meaningful" — isn't new. What is new are the means to make work meaningful through lean thinking.