

## **Lean and the Indian railway children project - a Lean Failure but an Unexpected Success!**

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This article refers to another article titled “A Supply Chain of Children” which is posted on [www.Lean4NGO.com](http://www.Lean4NGO.com)

### ***The Failure***

Prof Malcolm Harper (Emeritus Prof at Cranfield University UK) has worked for over 25 years on various social projects in India. One organisation that he has been involved with is Sathi, an Indian charity which rescues and repatriates to home runaway children who end up on Indian railway stations. I met Malcolm some two years ago and at his suggestion volunteered to go to India to carry out a pilot project to apply value chain analysis and lean improvement techniques to the Sathi child rescue process.

The associated paper (A Supply Chain of Children) describes the project. Unfortunately Sathi have not pursued the VCA/lean methodologies and suggestions emanating from the project.

There are a number of reasons for this some of which are as follows:

The project was instigated by Prof Harper a very concerned supporter of Sathi, but not someone who was involved directly in the management of the charity. Probably out of respect to Prof Harper the senior management of Sathi agreed to a pilot VCA project. As most lean practitioners will know, gaining management commitment to any lean initiative is critical.

In retrospect Sathi senior management never really fully engaged with the project in spite of a structured effort to gain their understanding and commitment both before during and subsequent to the India visit.

On the one hand this could have been due to a lack of inclination from senior management from the outset.

On the other hand it could have been due to my failure to adequately demonstrate the potential of VCA and lean to the organisation.

- Interestingly however, a number of the operational staff who worked in the shelters and on the stations did become very keen to evaluate their processes with a view to identifying waste and improving efficiency, as they could clearly see it would have a positive impact on their day-to-day jobs
- Unfortunately, as the lean adviser, I was only working with Sathi in India for two weeks which was not enough time to gain sufficient understanding across the organisation of the potential benefits of lean, particularly given that there were some problems with language. My original plan had been for the project to be continued and championed subsequent my visit by an able young Sathi manager Manoj Kumar, who I would coach and encourage from the UK. As explained in the article, unfortunately Manoj had to leave the organisation soon after the VCA exercise was complete due to funding cuts. Trying to inspire and motivate a lean

adoption project remotely from the UK without an in-house champion proved impossible.

Overall the main lesson is really same as with any VCA/lean transformation: key staff within the organisation need to be convinced of the benefits in order to drive the work forward. Perhaps it was unrealistic from the outset to believe this could be achieved on the basis of a short fly-in, fly-out visit albeit with a plan for remote follow-up.

Nevertheless, in spite of the failure to implement at Sathi, I believe that VCA and lean concepts could be of significant benefit to evaluating and improving processes for organisations involved in child rescue, be that on railway platforms as in India or for street children in other situations. Systematic process mapping and quantification of process performance would be a huge advance for organisations whose staff are socially orientated and typically not really aware or equipped to start thinking about process improvement.

Perhaps the key lesson from this project is the need to think very carefully about the challenges of change management required for lean transformation in socially orientated organisations. If Plan A doesn't work; is there a Plan B?

### ***The Success***

In spite of the fact that the project with Sathi did not come to fruition, the time and effort spent on this project was not wasted. As a result of working directly with Manoj Kumar whilst in Pune, Malcolm Harper, myself and Manoj have over the last two years, worked together to establish and fund a new railway rescue project in the town of Bhubaneswar in eastern India. Since August 2012 some 500 children have been rescued, most of whom have been returned home. Knowing that the lives and futures of these children have been significantly affected is a cause for great satisfaction for all of us involved

From a personal point of view, having done over 30 VCA projects in the commercial world, working with these charities that rescue vulnerable children has been one of my most rewarding experiences.