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articles

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Lean and Africa

By Carlo Scodanibbio

Every year I am based for about 6 months in Africa (Cape Town, South Africa) and 6 months in Europe (Malta).

Because of this migratory style, I happen to be lucky enough to notice changes - both in Europe and in South Africa.

What do I notice in South Africa?

Primarily, one phenomenon - which is the common denominator of several consequences.

The phenomenon in argument is an ever-increasing level of **Complexity** and **Bureaucracy**.

Certainly - one might argue - this is general: it's happening all over the world....

But in South Africa it has a very peculiar character: it is considered normal and, as such, well acceptable.

Let me give you a couple of examples:

- Banks. A Banking system that years ago was simple, functional and highly customer-oriented, has become over the years so complex, so full of forms to be completed, so full of redundant security measures, and so full of complex IT Systems, that the net result is: more time (for the customer - for whatever transaction) - more aggravations (in terms of documentation to be produced) - and very little customer-friendly (customers have been transformed from Mr X or Ms Y to Mr/Ms Account Number and/or ID Number).
- Insurance Companies. Years ago, it was a pleasure dealing with Insurers or Brokers for a claim or whatever transaction: the system was customer-driven, effective, efficient, fast. Nowadays it has become a pain in the neck: complex documentation - inflexible (strict clauses with no exception) - generally much slower in response time - and "*take it or leave it...*" attitude.
- Private Service Providers and Retailers. Similar considerations: strict procedures - poor customer attention - less service (even if at times camouflaged with formal, pre-baked greetings sentences....)

Well, I am talking of South Africa. With confidence that much of the sub-Sahara Africa is going through a very similar phenomenon. What is going on?

We all know that the entire world has become more complex. But what about Bureaucracy?

Generally speaking, Bureaucracy is a way of being in control of processes that have been arbitrarily fragmented: every process is composed of activities executed by people, machines or combination.

A fragmented process is one in which each activity is independent from the others, and executed by a single-skill/single-function person or machine. Process fragmentation has been invented over 2 centuries ago by Adam Smith, then perfected by Frederick Taylor. That was the First Industrial Revolution, based on high, localised, activity efficiency (Labour Division principle).

Bureaucracy, in such system, is a necessity: control of a fragmented process must be based on rules and procedures (the glue that holds together bits and pieces of a process....).

So why is Bureaucracy increasing - with particular accent in Africa?

Because of a choice - the choice is between two avenues:

- The "traditional" choice. In a nutshell: *"...let's stick to traditional, proven principles, and enhance process fragmentation, single-skilling/single-functioning, and top-driven control.... this will create "jobs" for little-skilled and/or unskilled people in the rather short term....."*
- The "lean" choice. In a nutshell: *"...let's embrace modern principles, and enhance value-adding processing, multi-skilling/multi-functioning, and gradually less top-driven control.... this will create wealth for everybody in the medium/long term....."*

South Africa, and much of the rest of Africa, has (consciously? naively?) chosen the traditional option.

I do not intend - at all - to analyse the political reasons behind this choice: I am simply noticing a phenomenon and trying to illustrate its main consequences.

THE CONSEQUENCES - CONSIDERATIONS

- Yes, jobs - for the sake of creating jobs - have been created. Parking Marshalls have replaced coin-fed parking meters. Industry has assisted to the triumph of Single-Skilling/Single-Functioning. Roles such as "helper", "line feeder", "assistant", "labourer", "attendant", etc. have skyrocketed. One high-level manager recently told me *"...now, only now, I realise that we have spent years de-skilling people, instead of re-skilling/multi-skilling them....."*. So, jobs have been created - maybe. But wealth? It would appear that wealth is not increasing, but is rather going the opposite way.....
- Once trapped in "traditional" principles, the situation can be exasperated. It has been. Single-Skilling has been classified, codified, institutionalised: single-skill specialisation is a norm and a rule, at low-level and high level. I wanted to upgrade the software of my 3G modem and went recently into a branch of a famous Mobile Telephony Provider: the answer? *"...oh, no, not here.... that can be done only in the XX Branch....."*. In industry, there are very few "artisans" left - most of them are now pensioners. Years ago there were excellent "artisans", multi-skill, multi-ability, multi-function, capable of taking care of an entire repair/maintenance job, or a construction job, or.... Where are they now? Practically disappeared, replaced (ineffectively) by a number of single-skill doers, often interfering with each other, and with considerable idle time in their work-cycle schedule (pure waste).....
- Without even mentioning what happens in Public Offices, it does not take long to notice the increasing bureaucracy even in the Private Sector. Forms, procedures, rules... Years ago I could book a camping site over the phone - today I have to fill, sign and email a form, and email as well proof of payment.... If I had a motor claim with my Insurers, they would immediately send an assessor who would inspect my accidented vehicle, fill a claim form for me to sign, authorise repairs there and then, and even get the insurers to pay the Panel Beater directly....

- Nowadays I have to provide and email photos, claim form, scanned Police Report, supporting documentation including signed statement of events, etc. etc. plus pay for repairs and then fill, sign and email a "release form" to get refunded (less fat excess...)... and so on. These are signals of higher bureaucracy consequent to process fragmentation and no process-ownership.
- As such, **Value to the Customer** (a fundamental Lean principle) has decreased sharply. In terms of - as I was saying - more time, slower response, more aggravations. Plus, an ever increasing mass-communication approach instead of the lean "one-to-one" approach. Just think how the so-called *Call Centres* have mushroomed...
- Unfortunately, there are also other signals. One rather strong signal is that - generally - sense of "responsibility" has dramatically decreased. Responsibility for own work and its outcome. I brought recently my car for a valet service. On collection, I noticed the aerial top was missing. They looked and searched everywhere. Nothing. So, *"...sorry, Sir, it's not here.... most probably this car came this morning without aerial top...."*. Impossible. That aerial top doesn't fall accidentally - it must be forced out. Well, end result: *"...not our fault... besides we display a prominent notice that we are not responsible for items lost in these premises....."*. Shocking? I brought the same car after a few days to have the aerial top replaced (at an exorbitant cost). And I did not bother to remove from the car a few parking coins I normally keep there to tip.... On collection, no parking coins - gone. I pointed it out, not for the value of those coins, but as a matter of principle. Answer: *"....when you sign a job card, you should notice that we are not responsible for any valuable left in the vehicle..... Apologies.... But, you know: we are in Africa....."*. Which leads to the next consideration.
- Finally, the **"feeling there is nothing that can be done....."**. Lack of confidence in the future. A diffused feeling. One can sniff it, one can hear it, one can see it.... It's like to say: *"....why care? what for? there is no future...."*. Bad, bad news. In the past few years, every time I presented a Lean course in South Africa, I heard - without exception - some delegate coming up with comments such as *"...brilliant course.... very nice principles.... BUT, can it be done in Africa?....."*

CONCLUSIONS

Would Africa benefit from embracing Lean principles?

The answer is definitely YES!

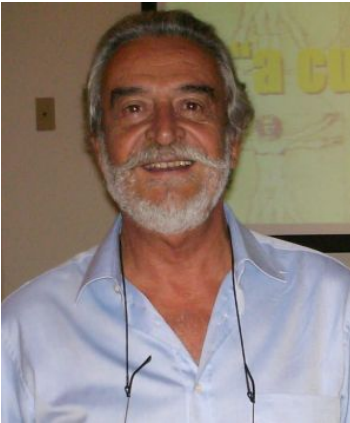
Can Africa do it?

Of course it can. It has been done. It can be done again. Several clients of mine (from the Private Sector) still keep telling me *"....fortunately we decided to go lean... shouldn't we have done that, today - in this turbulent economical situation - we would have been dead....."*.

I agree, the future scenario does not look brilliant - at all. The way ahead is very "rocky" And yet, with positive confidence, with determination, with drive... it can be done.

All the best, Africa!

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Carlo Scodanibbio, born in Macerata (Italy) in 1944, holds an Italian doctor degree in Electrical Engineering (Politecnico di Milano - 1970).

He has over 49 years of experience in Plant Engineering, Project Engineering and Project Management, as well as Industrial Engineering and Operations Management.

Free-lance Consultant since 1979, he has worked in a wide spectrum of companies and industries in many countries (Southern Africa - Italy - Cape Verde - Romania - Malta - Cyprus - Lebanon - Mauritius - Malaysia - Nigeria - Kenya - India - Saudi Arabia - Seychelles), and operates as an Independent Professional Consultant and Human Resources Trainer to industry. His area of intervention is:

World Class Performance for Small and Medium Enterprises in the Project, Manufacturing, and Service sectors.

His favourite area of action is: the "lean" area.

He has co-operated, inter-alia, with the Cyprus Chamber of Commerce, the Cyprus Productivity Centre, the Malta Federation of Industry, the Mauritius Employers' Federation, the Romanian Paper Industry Association, the United Nations Industrial Development Organisation and the University of Cape Town.

His courses and seminars, conducted in English, Italian and French, have been attended by well over 20.000 Entrepreneurs, Managers, Supervisors and Workers. They feature a very high level of interaction, and are rich in simulations, exercising and real case studies. The approach is invariably "hands-on" and addressed to immediate, practical application.

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