

This **Insight** is 479 words  
Reading time: < 3 minutes  
Value: Priceless

## Doctor's Orders: Don't Get Too Lean

The cheers resounding from the dark corners of your R&D labs and Marketing departments are in response to a recent *Business Week* cover article, which bravely reveals the dark side of six-sigma and lean efforts: "When these types of initiatives become ingrained in a company's culture... creativity can easily get squelched."

### Our Take

Lean and six sigma are powerful approaches which have generated extraordinary gains for practitioners; however, contrary to Jack Welch's assurances, unfettered implementation of these concepts is a dangerous prescription for your company's long term health. The 3M example demonstrates two painful, systemic side effects:

1. Vapid creativity. The quest at the heart of six-sigma to control variability necessarily curtails aberrations which, by the way, are exactly what creative ideas look like. In the book/movie *Patch Adams*, the misguided medical school strives to beat the humanity out of future doctors—six sigma applied to the practice of medicine. Yet the school's blindness to the need for a human touch in health care is strikingly similar to the quashing of creativity by contemporary executives overusing lean and six sigma.
2. Customer negligence. In the rush to reap lean benefits, the customer is often forgotten. Most companies equate lean to cost savings, and as lean thinking permeates the organization resources and attention increasingly focus inwardly. Yes, customers appreciate lower costs and on-time delivery; however, blindly assuming that all cost reductions will lead to higher sales or increased margins leaves the door wide open for competitors more attuned to the full array of factors driving customers' buying decisions.

Still, Toyota consistently demonstrates that it is possible to balance process improvements with creativity and customer focus. The putative progenitor of lean methodology has relentlessly increased quality while fostering breakthroughs including hybrid cars and Lexus's legendary customer service. You can have a similarly healthy approach to lean,



