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Lean thinking: Outside-in, bottom-up?

The paradox of contemporary soft lean and consultant-driven lean implementation

Abstract

Lean has evolved from an operational tool to a complete management concept that incorporates softer aspects such as participation, learning and leadership. This evolution challenges the traditional way in which large management consultancy firms intervene in the lean implementation process; an outside expert cannot easily install a soft, participation-oriented form of lean. To explore this challenge, we report a longitudinal, qualitative case study of how a large consultancy firm supported lean implementation in a public service organisation. Our findings show that although the consultants' rhetoric had been adapted to the contemporary ideal of soft lean, their practice had not: implementation remained tool-centred and external consultants took the roles of experts. We posit that the business model of large consultancy firms and the nature of conventional client–consultant contracts may explain this mismatch between consultants' talk and action. Hence, this challenge is difficult to overcome in practice, and managers are advised to consider critically what management consultants can and cannot effectively deliver in lean implementations.

Keywords: lean thinking, management consulting, change management, public services, lean implementation

Introduction

Lean is living and growing as best practice for organisational excellence. The concept has simultaneously spread to service industries and the public sector with the evolution of lean

thinking, in which organisational learning and local adaptations have become important principles (Hines, Holweg, & Rich, 2004; Procter & Radnor, 2014). In Scandinavia, lean has developed in a soft direction, where employee participation is emphasised over specific tools and techniques (Sederblad, 2013).

This article explores whether the revised interpretation of lean has led to a revised form of lean consultancy, as offered by the big management consultancy firms. A soft, participation-oriented lean does not fit easily with the rational, objective and decontextualised notion that lean is something that can be brought in and installed by an outside expert. Management consultants have been blamed for imposing standard solutions on diverse organisational problems, often bringing to the table nothing but Taylorism wrapped in fancy rhetoric (Carter et al., 2011; Jung & Kieser, 2012). Despite such criticism and developments in lean thinking, organisations still call in management consultants to help them implement lean (Radnor & O'Mahoney, 2013). Consultants themselves show few reservations in spreading the word about their superior approaches (Jung & Kieser, 2012), and the limited extent of performance evaluation in lean implementations has made it difficult to separate the good consultants from the mediocre ones (Bhasin, 2015). On the other hand, there are documented examples of consultants having a positive role in the initial phases of lean implementation: consultants help managers define lean, design manageable processes and transfer external knowledge to the organisation (Morris & Lancaster, 2006).

A recent review of publications of lean implementations in public service organizations (Brännmark, 2012) shows that management consultants are significantly present, but few articles explore how consultants approach the lean concept with their clients and evaluate the consultants' contribution in lean implementations. In the next section, a framework is developed that relates different interpretations of lean to different forms of management consultancy. Then, we present a case study of a lean implementation process, in which a management

consultant team from a large, global consultancy firm supported a public service organisation. We show that there was an intriguing mismatch between the consultants' rhetoric about their approach to lean and their actual consulting practice. In the final sections, we discuss theoretical and practical implications of the paradox between lean consultants' talk and action. Is there a legitimate role for external consultants in contemporary soft lean implementation, or should organisations manage their transitions in-house?

Lean goes soft – and so do the consultants?

Krafcik (1988) first introduced the lean concept after studying global automotive manufacturing and deciphering Toyota's production system. It was the popularity of the book *The Machine that Changed the World* (Womack, Jones, & Roos, 1990), which claimed that lean principles were applicable to every industry, that marked the beginning of the spread of the concept, though (Holweg, 2007). The core of lean is described in five principles. First, there is *specifying value creation*, followed by *identifying the value streams* of the production process and eliminating waste. The third is *creating flow* in the production line from supplier to customer, and the fourth is *creating pull*, by allowing customer demand to be the driver. Finally and most importantly, is striving to achieve the four previous principles through a systematic approach towards *continuous improvement* (Womack & Jones, 1996).

Similar to other management concepts, such as BPR (Heusinkveld, Benders, & Hillebrand, 2013) and TQM (Zbaracki, 1998), lean has been stretched to fit different local contexts by both its promoters and adopting organisations. Lean has evolved significantly from the early stages in the 1980s. At first, it was considered a technical approach, based on applying specific Toyota techniques such as kanban and just-in-time logistics. Lean was later described as a management system for the whole organisation and supply chain, with an emphasis on contingencies and organisational learning (Hines et al., 2004). From around 2000, researchers

looked for things that were ‘lost in translation’ between Toyota and the West (Nicholas, 2014): leadership style (Liker & Convis, 2012), culture (Liker & Hoseus, 2008), and ways of improving and learning (Rother, 2010). Furthermore, lean has become something beyond ‘what Toyota would do’: a general ‘philosophy’, which can be translated and adapted to different corporate contexts (Hines et al., 2004). In Scandinavia, a wave of ‘soft lean’ has been aligned with traditions of employee participation, emphasising the involvement of front-end employees and learning through continuous improvement (Sederblad, 2013). Soft aspects, such as ‘respect for people’ (Emiliani & Stec, 2005), ‘transformational leadership’ (Poksinska, Swartling, & Drotz, 2013), ‘sensei leadership’, as well as ‘hosin kanri’ (coordinated management) and ‘kata’ (building culture by practice) (Liker & Convis, 2012), have become part of contemporary, international lean rhetoric. Lean leaders should exemplify its values and coach their subordinates in the routines of ‘sensing, adapting and improving’ (Rother, 2010, p. 15). Furthermore, lean should be seen as seeking to maximise learning opportunities for internal and external actors, and to single out the necessary operational tools for providing customer value (Hines et al., 2004).

Different interpretations of lean correspond to different forms of management consulting. This argument, based on Hines et al. (2004) and Sederblad’s (2013) elaborations of the evolution of lean, and Schein (1999) and Nikolova and Devinney’s (2012) dichotomies of consultancy, is summarised in Table 1. Thinking of lean in terms of tools and techniques, what we refer to as ‘hard lean’, means that the management consultant is a conveyer of decontextualised knowledge: the consultant is hired as a diagnosing and prescribing ‘doctor’ or as a selling and telling ‘expert’ (Schein, 1999). These are the classical images of the management consultant; he or she treats organisations as rational systems and sells management concepts as tools for increasing efficiency and securing market survival (Alvesson, 2012). Consultancy firms recruit newly educated candidates, who share the world view of positivist



sciences and socialise them into this rational ideology (Alvesson, 2012), which remains the *raison d'être* of the traditional consultancy firm. If management advice cannot be decontextualised and transferred from one place to another, there would be no sense in young consultants telling senior executives what to do (Armbrüster, 2004).

The soft concept of lean as a locally adapted, continuous learning system challenges this way of thinking about management consultancy. Instead, organisational learning theories suggest the idea of a 'process consultant', as opposed to the 'doctor' or the 'expert' (Schein, 1999). Whereas the latter heralds knowledge as correct answers and transference of standard solutions from sender to receiver, the former approach is based on a helping relationship in which the client reflects and learns (Nikolova & Devinney, 2012). In a Socratic manner, the process consultant brings knowledge to the surface. This time-consuming type of consultancy aims to foster a dialectic process of equal power between client and consultant.

The history of organisational development demonstrates how the consulting industry has adopted different theoretical ideas in fashionable waves, and turned organisational change into a broad and pluralistic field (Burnes & Cooke, 2012). Competitive pressures, reinforced in times of slow economic growth, pushes towards service innovation and differentiation even further (Morris, Gardner, & Anand, 2012). The large global consultancies are powerful in defining and disseminating standardised organisation concepts. However, there are countermoves, for example, by small, specialist firms and academics with alternative approaches, as well as critical consumers on the client side (O'Mahoney & Sturdy, 2015). The large consultancies have sometimes responded by altering their approaches and services, for example, O'Mahoney and Sturdy (2015) cite McKinsey's new strategy of recruiting more experienced consultants due to clients refusing to pay for young MBA graduates. Flagging the importance of the soft side of lean (Fine, Hansen, & Roggenhofer, 2008) might be seen as another example of adaption to changing waves of popularity.

This softening of lean has not led to a decline in the demand for lean consultancy. Is lean implementation yet another example of ‘how management consultants steal your watch and then tell you the time’ (Kihn, 2009), or do consultants contribute to successful lean implementations by adjusting their traditional roles?

Table 1: A model of hard and soft lean corresponding to hard and soft management consultancy

	Hard	Soft
Lean	Technical, tool-based Prescriptive: one best way Focus on cost-efficiency ‘Mean’ Concerning shop floor	Value systems, philosophy Adaptive Focus on customer value Participative Concerning whole organisation
		
Management consultancy	Expert: telling how Doctor: diagnosing and treating Decontextualised knowledge Transferring expert knowledge (unidirectional) Episodic change	Process consultant: helping and facilitating Contextualised knowledge Collaborative/participative knowledge construction Organisational learning

Methodology

The consultancy firm in our case study is given the pseudonym Global Consultancy (GC). Globally, GC has more than 100,000 employees, and in Norway, 200 management consultants, of whom the senior lean consultants have significant experience in and market share of lean implementation projects. In this case, their client is a large public service organisation, given the pseudonym Admin Support, specialising in administrative and technical support to other public organisations.

A qualitative, longitudinal case study provides insight into organisational dynamics in context (Eisenhardt, 1989; Pettigrew, 1997). We used the method of ‘shadowing’ (Vie, 2010)

GC consultants for 10 working days during our initial visit at Admin Support in June 2012. We observed their interaction with members of Admin Support, sharing their intentions, intervention methodology, documents and reflections on the change process. The observations were followed by two later visits on the client’s site in 2013. At our three visits, both consultants and clients were interviewed. Table 2 gives an overview of the informants and when the interviews took place. To ensure reliability in data collection, we used multiple investigation techniques (Eisenhardt, 1989): a team was formed with one of the authors and a group of Masters students for data collection; another author, with prior experience as a GC consultant, supervised these students and then coded the data.

Field notes and transcriptions of interviews were coded using NVIVO 10.0, followed by thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), based on principles from Tjora’s (2012) ‘Stepwise-Deductive Inductive’ approach. We performed iterative processes of combining inductive ‘generalisation’ and deductive ‘specialisation’: we coded the transcribed material into shorter statements, grouped these into categories and built complex relational diagrams of patterns, from which we repeatedly tried to abstract theories by ‘digging down’ into the material. The highest level of categorisation and pattern-testing were performed on large paper and whiteboards, whereas the NVIVO file became a database of detailed information. In the final stage of our analysis, we structured our findings by the top-level categories: 1) the lean rhetoric of consultants, 2) the intentional approach of the consultants, 3) the practice of consultants and 4) the client’s responses and outcomes. In addition, we mapped this against time (when) and role (who) dimensions within the process.

Table 2: Informants and interview times

Visit	June 2012	March–April 2013	November 2013
14 informants 19 recorded interviews	Client lean navigator (A)	Client lean navigator (A)	Client lean navigator (A)
	Senior consultant (B)	Senior consultant (B)	Senior consultant (B)
	Client employee (C)	Expert consultant (H)	Client employee (C)
	Client lean navigator (D)	Junior consultant (I)	Client employee (M)
	Junior consultant (E)	Client employee (J)	Client manager (N)

Junior consultant (F)	Client manager (K)
Client manager (G)	Client employee (L)

Findings

The sweet sound of soft lean

Lean was initiated in Admin Support as a solution to what our informants described as an unsatisfactory situation of delays, errors and an unhealthy work environment. A group of senior managers had been on an inspirational trip to peer organisations practising lean, in Denmark. Considering their internal competence in change management and lean implementation to be inadequate, they initiated a publicly regulated procurement process, in which GC succeeded. Funding was taken from Admin Support’s regular budget, and keeping costs low was an important decision criterion in the procurement process.

GC’s core team of lean consultants had previously worked with a series of public service organisations, and talking about lean during the observations and interviews, we found that their rhetoric aligned with the current soft lean concept described in the literature. Table 3, showing quotations from the leading lean expert in GC (H), illustrates this.

Table 3: Soft lean adopted in consultant’s rhetoric

Quotations from lean expert consultant (H)	Aspects of soft lean
<i>‘Lean can be many things, but there are three things you cannot disregard: customer orientation (...), employee participation (...) and the third is that you need certain systems.’</i>	Concept contingency
<i>‘The smartest thing might not be to digitise the communication. Some customers need a kick up the backside, some need a hand and some need a shoulder to cry on.’</i>	Customer focus
<i>‘The most important thing is that they create their own solution. Ownership all the time, ownership, ownership, ownership. Experiencing success and building motivation.’</i>	Participation
<i>‘Many organisations we meet change because of stronger steering and control. I want to avoid that. Of course, you need some control, but we also emphasise cultural change. Management training and cultural attitudes, attitudes concerning customers, employees and systematic continuous improvement. To succeed you need what in our jargon is called KATA. Everyone talks about KATA now.’</i>	Leadership

'Lean is not at all about tools! Ohno said: Never codify or document Systems, not tools tools.'

Employees and managers attending the presentations by the lean expert reported being inspired and motivated. The younger consultants shared the same rhetoric as the expert, as the following explanation of lean by one of them (E) illustrates:

To me, lean is to create more value with less resources. This means that people, both customers and employees, should benefit and have a better everyday life. If you look for a random definition of lean out there, you might find a focus on processes or infrastructures, but here at [GC] we are instilled with the idea that changes in practice will not be sustained if the way of thinking is unchanged.

Nevertheless, when these younger consultants talked about lean, they rapidly returned to technical issues, such as performing data analysis or using lean tools and methods, related to their own practice in lean projects.

Making themselves superfluous

Based on previous experience, popular lean books and the generic, global methodology of the firm, the consultant team designed a tailor-made programme for lean implementation to Admin Support. The core of this design was helping the client organization to help themselves implement lean by introducing the lean-thinking ideal of coaching and learning. Making the client independent of further consultancy support in such a significant change process was also financially appealing. The programme consisted of a series of interventions in pilot units over the following year, focusing on process improvement, problem-solving methods and production control. After teaching internal members of Admin Support the lean philosophy through lean tools and coaching techniques, the consultants would gradually withdraw from the client site. This approach resembles the model of 'diminished mentorship' for sustainable change

(Schattenkirk, 2012). Two aspects from the global methodology for all change projects were clearly incorporated into this project approach. First, the workload distribution among the team formed a pyramid, where the youngest consultants spent the most working hours on the project, and the top expert the least. The junior consultants performed analysis and process support while the senior consultants (with more than 5 years' relevant experience and internal training in the GC methodology) worked on designing and supervising the process. The lean expert's contribution was attending important meetings, giving lectures and taking formal responsibility for the design and quality assurance of the deliverables.

Second, the design of the process was built on the principle that the consultants would take the leading role in the beginning and gradually hand over responsibility to the client, to ensure the new concept was sustained after the consultants' departure. This design led to a sequential implementation, taking one section of front-end employees and local managers at a time, then gradually handing over responsibility to the client to complete the implementation across the whole organisation, as explained by a senior consultant (B):

We have a kind of learning curve that we use. In the first pilot project we do for a client, we do a lot. The second project is more shoulder-to-shoulder, and more delegation to the internal consultants. On the third project, if we are involved in a third project, we are behind the scenes as sparring partners. They do everything themselves.

Approaching lean from the bottom

The projects took place at the operational level. The knowledge transfer from the consultants was aimed in three directions: to the managers, employees and internal consultants called 'lean navigators'. The navigator role was mainly a support role at the operational level, requiring a specialist in lean techniques to coach employees and operational managers in continuous

improvement. As such, the consultants were imitating the way Toyota train their employees and leaders, by situated learning using lean tools and techniques, as explained by the expert consultant (H):

We start A3s from day one, arrange groups and just start working with it. (...) What we have today is 'learning by doing', 'shoulder-to-shoulder', 'on-the-job training'. This sort of philosophy, and just-in-time-training, where we train the skills when they need it. (...) We try to hardwire the competence through governing systems where you are forced to get more customer-oriented through these systems.

The consultants were concerned that employees did not have sufficient understanding of customer value, and were too concerned about their day-to-day practice. After a short period of 'creating attention' by lectures about lean philosophy and simulation games, the main effort of the projects was to introduce lean methods such as value stream mapping, removing waste, production levelling, A3 problem-solving and whiteboard meetings. A3 teamwork and whiteboard meetings appeared to be the main elements of the consultancy approach during our visits. Regular whiteboard meetings gave all employees and operational managers an overview of the current situation, goals and achievements; in A3 problem-solving, a group of employees were led by an 'A3 group leader', coached first by a GC consultant and then a lean navigator, who was himself coached by the GC consultant. The idea of the coaching consultant was to facilitate the managers in adjusting the whiteboard meetings to their local needs, and let the A3 group define, analyse and suggest solutions for themselves by asking pertinent questions that would help them move forward in the process. However, when the younger consultants were under time constraints, they were less flexible, and took a more directive role of telling and instructing.

When the expert consultant (H) was asked about the relationship between the seemingly technically oriented training and the ideals of customer focus and coaching, he explained that the employees would build up an understanding of the values of lean through practical experience:

A3 is not a tool, but a process and a mindset. This is what we work most with, the customer focus. If we succeed, it will be with the customer focus. That is extremely important.

By claiming that a specific understanding is a natural consequence of a technical practice, the consultant legitimised the ambiguity of the consultants' talk and action in this approach.

Training soft lean consultancy the hard way

The 'coaching the coaches' approach of the GC consultants to the internal lean navigators was a step towards making the organisation self-contained in lean development. Three navigators were appointed and each paired with one external consultant to learn the consultant's role by gradually taking responsibility: by first observing the external consultant, then by guiding and finally by coaching. The navigators were supposed to 'parrot' the external consultants until they mastered the art of consulting, as demonstrated by one of the younger GC consultants' (I) statement on our second visit:

I believe that the navigator should have the same skills as the external consultant. They have to possess the proper knowledge to be able to train and involve the employees. They are competent, but they have different profiles. (...) We observe that they are developing quite well in the field, but they are not ready yet.

The skills of an ideal consultant were to balance coaching, by expert questioning, with ensuring that employee's solutions were sufficiently good. As such, a consultant should not provide answers, but pose good questions for the employees to discuss until they devise a suitable solution. Paradoxically, the consultants took a more 'hard consulting' approach in coaching the navigators. They were not invited to find their own way of being a navigator, but were presented with fixed solutions on 'being a process consultant' and given direct feedback and instructions on how to be 'less technically oriented'.

The hard reality of unintended outcomes

With the proviso that Admin Support was not in its final stage of lean implementation (if ever!) and the consultants had not completely signed the project off, we raise some unintended outcomes that were observed during our final visit: project overrun, dominance of 'hard' internal consulting, augmented technical orientation and a faded enthusiasm for lean.

The process of training navigators uncovered conflicts and paradoxes in the client–consultant relationship. First, CG's lean expert (H) stated that this was a risk under the contract, because the budget did not cover the time required to train the internal consultants:

Our challenge is the time limit of our contract. At the time, we are involved with 2–5 full-time equivalents, and we have to consider prolongation. [The manager] is determined to manage without us, but in my opinion that is impossible. I try to convince him that it is premature. As a consultancy firm, picking people from the elite, we are extremely professional in training consultants and never let them out on their own before gaining 2 years of experience. It is madness to let people without the same academic or conceptual background handle this.

Apparently, the discussion about prolonging the contract had been negotiated at the top level, since the consultants had a more active role on our third visit than originally planned, and the client incurred higher costs. The idea of the self-sufficient client was not yet realised; they had not found their own way of doing lean, and certainly not in the ideal way that GC espoused.

Furthermore, the navigators were experienced people who would not accept an apprentice role to the younger external consultants, nor uncritically embrace the GC consultancy's ideal. In fact, one lean navigator had previously been a lean consultant in another firm and partly disagreed with the GC design. Referred to as an 'aggravating challenge' rather than a resource by the consultants, this navigator was frustrated at being constrained. By the time of our third visit, this navigator had left Admin Support.

Another navigator had spent several years as a manager in Admin Support and had a thorough insight into its internal processes. The young consultants, however, expressed their concern about his technical focus and incongruous consulting style compared to the GC ideal. This navigator had a more directive way of teaching the A3 groups, intervening more in defining the problems and solutions, and sharing his expert knowledge. He did so self-consciously, since he believed the processual way of asking questions and coaching was too time-consuming:

Yes, I see my role differently than what [GC] does (...). It is not that I don't want to act in the way they tell me, I meet them halfway, or even closer, but not quite where they are. (...) [The GC ideal] will not be efficient over a three to four month period. It has to be more about showing the way, giving responsibility, but not playing hard to get in giving direct advice.

Ironically, the behaviour of this navigator was very similar to that of the GC consultants; the differences lying in rhetoric and self-presentation. In this sense, the navigator copied the

consultants' practice but ignored what they said: 'learning by doing', but not in keeping with the intentions of the plan.

Despite several examples of groups practising lean techniques and achieving better scores on the organisation's performance indicators, we found that Admin Support had not succeeded in implementing lean as intended after one and a half years' assistance from GC. Although some senior managers proudly talked about the lean programme, we saw few signs of lean thinking affecting strategic decisions. On the contrary, one of the units that had worked hardest with lean techniques was restructured and the employees reported that they felt senior management had disregarded that hard work. Indeed, on our final visit, the employees' previous enthusiasm was almost non-existent, and the lean philosophy had been replaced by a more tool-oriented jargon. The understanding of customer value seemed unchanged, an impression confirmed by the senior consultant (B):

It depends on who you talk to, but for a significant amount of them, I think they would have spoken about continuous improvement through methods like problem-solving, whiteboard meetings and A3s. I do not think they have great ideas about the lean philosophy.

Discussion and research implications

The contribution of our case study, in which we followed a consultant–client relationship over a longer period, is in revealing paradoxes between what was intended, what was done and what was practised as the consultants gradually withdrew. What the consultants 'sold' in their rhetoric resembled the contemporary concept of a soft lean organisation, but what the client actually received was a technical and tool-based understanding of lean, guided by a hard, expert consultancy style from their internal consultants.

A majority of organisations fail to implement lean in terms of a continuously improving organisation (Bhasin, 2015), one important reason being the lack of management commitment and support, which is well documented (Holmemo & Ingvaldsen, 2015; Netland, 2015) and corresponds to our findings. However, our case study brings together and elaborates on two other well-known causes for implementation failure. First, ‘hard’ and technical lean at the bottom of the organisational hierarchy, founded on an efficiency logic, has been shown to lead to sub-optimisation and lack of customer value (Radnor & Johnston, 2013; Radnor & Osborne, 2013). Second, critics of management consultancy blame it for conning organisations into faddish concepts by appealing rhetoric (Alvesson, 2012; Jung & Kieser, 2012). Our theory, though, is that consultants are not necessarily ignorant of the importance of the softer aspects of lean, nor do they deliberately try to con their clients with their rhetoric; instead, our findings show that they are up-to-date with the research and management literature, and do try to translate this into their implementation designs. Sadly, it seems that this is an intractable task due to the business models of large consultancy firms and the constraints on time and resources in the client contracts.

Any approach to change needs to be coherent with the objectives of the change (Cherns, 1976); hence, softer lean has to be implemented by a softer consulting method. The business model of GC follows that of most global consultancies: selling a high volume of services, using a large group of newly educated students from elite schools; using more experienced consultants to sell projects to top-level managers and support these juniors (Alvesson, 2012; O’Mahoney & Sturdy, 2015), who have excellent formal skills and technical competence, but less experience and source credibility in meeting with clients (Ko, Kirsch, & King, 2005). A premise for the role of adding value in a client organisation is that consultants’ contributions can be decontextualised – from a rational perspective, management concepts are context-free – but this does not correspond with contemporary lean, which emphasises local contingencies

and adaption (Hines et al., 2004). It could be argued that processual coaching techniques can be taught and applied independently of context, as is the practice of junior GC consultants and what they try to convey to navigators. However, Schein (1999) underlines the importance of managerial experience and patience in this consultant role. Coaching local participants in the process of finding the best solutions thus appears utopian, especially within time constraints.

In their rhetoric and design, the GC consultants exhibit similarities with the model of Toyota's 'coaching kata' (Rother, 2010). However, this model contradicts the external consultants' approach, in both time frame and staffing:

Developing internal routines and capability for daily continuous improvement and adaption at all processes involving all people – culture – is by definition something that an organisation must do for itself. An experienced external consultant can provide coaching inputs, especially at the beginning, and even experiment with you. But to develop your own capability, the effort will have to be internally led, from the top.
(Rother, 2010, p. 236)

This excerpt brings us to another problem with the consultancy approach. Leadership has been widely described as the most important factor for successful implementation (Netland, 2015) and the main cause of failures (Hines, Martins, & Beale, 2008). Supportive, developing and transformational leadership (Poksinska et al., 2013), as well as systematic coordination through management structures (Nicholas, 2014), have been stressed. While value-oriented rhetoric from an outside expert can be inspirational, as seen in this case study, it is insufficient to change corporate culture (Schein, 2010). Similarly, shop-floor participation and empowerment of teams are necessary, but insufficient in terms of adding customer value. External consultants are therefore requested to shift their focus from the operational level to the network or strategic level (Radnor & O'Mahoney, 2013): learning by doing at the lowest level of an organisation

without adaption to the lean philosophy at higher levels of management, puts the sustainability of lean implementation at greater risk.

To be fair, one cannot expect consultants to make managers think and act differently, and thus they cannot be blamed when management support and commitment is missing. This study is limited to a single case, and unfortunately, we know little about the top management's rationale for implementing lean or hiring consultants. Although decoupling the rhetoric and actions in management's approach to fashionable concepts has been elaborated elsewhere (Meyer & Rowan, 1977), further studies on the interaction between management and consultants in the processes of tendering or contracting would complement our findings. Future research may also explore whether or not our findings are valid also outside the Scandinavian context. Values of participation and learning have a particularly strong position in the Scandinavian working life (Sederblad, 2013), and in other context the nature of consultant-client relationships may give rise to different organizational dynamics.

Conclusion and practical implications

In this case study, we have presented a dichotomy of hard and soft lean, where the soft version is the contemporary ideal in Scandinavian organisations. We have showed that management consultants have adopted the rhetoric of soft lean, but are unable to integrate this concept into their business model. The outside-in knowledge transfer from young generalists to the 'native' shop-floor employees is not coherent with the idea of lean as a pervading philosophy and management system of continuous learning.

Our findings suggest that managers should critically consider what management consultants can and cannot effectively deliver in lean implementations that will build a continuously improving and value-adding service organisation. Soft lean is best developed

internally supported by substantial effort and commitment from line managers (Rother, 2010). Does this imply that consultants have nothing useful to offer organisations in lean implementation processes? Not necessarily. As Rother (2010) suggests, organisations can benefit from inviting experienced consultants into discussions, especially in the initial phases of the implementation process (Radnor, Walley, Stephens, & Bucci, 2006). As consultants have both generic knowledge and relevant ‘multi-case’ experience, an egalitarian meeting between the insider and outsider provides fertile ground for learning and innovation (Klev & Levin, 2012).

The experienced process consultant (Schein, 1999) might fulfil the ideal role, but this involves huge time and resource demands. Complementary to process consultation, a softer concept of lean also involves technical tools and generic methods. Public service organisations need training on basic tools and techniques in process and performance improvement (Radnor & O'Mahoney, 2013), which talented junior consultants can suggest, perform and teach the client organisation.

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