



## Japan trip an eye opener for forestry company

BY SANDRINE MARRASSÉ  
PHOTOGRAPHY BY JUAN VAN STADEN

NML's Gerald Dysart (front left) and the Lean tour group enjoy a Japanese meal, dressed in traditional Yukata

Our competitive global economy requires businesses to continually look for ways to improve productivity. To achieve that goal, business leaders often focus on reducing direct costs, decreasing overheads, or using tools like new software to create better systems.

Implementing new business ideas that are people-focused or require a shift in philosophy is less common but, as Nelson Management Ltd (NML) is finding, it can be an exciting and challenging process that is ultimately rewarding for everyone involved.

Nigel Brabyn and Gerald Dysart of NML (the management company for Nelson Forests Ltd) have recently returned from an inspiring trip to Japan. The intention behind the trip was to learn more about the Lean Manufacturing System so that they could continue to implement Lean management principles within NML. What they saw and learned reinforced the importance of keeping things simple and focused on people.

Lean is based around the concept of eliminating waste (*Muda*), thereby improving value and quality, and ultimately increasing customer and employee satisfaction. Waste is seen as anything that decreases value; for example waiting time, over-production, over-processing and even unnecessary employee movement like bending and reaching.

The goal is to continuously improve things (no matter how small) and to empower workers to be part of this improvement by submitting *Kaizen* ideas. *Kaizen* literally means change for the better, and employees are encouraged to submit ideas about anything they think will create an improvement in the workplace.

The Lean Manufacturing system has several origin points including The Ford System, but Lean as it is taught today is

based on the Toyota Production System, the brainchild of Industrial Engineer Taiichi Ohno.

Nigel Brabyn has been with NML for the best part of 35 years, beginning as a cadet and building his way up through the company to his current role as Business Performance Analyst. Gerald Dysart manages domestic log sales for the company.

Nigel and Gerald are part of an eight-strong guidance team at NML



The group learn Lean fundamentals from Junichi Suzuki, President of Suzuki Industries, a component supplier for Toyota



Nigel Brabyn (centre) standing next to Junichi Suzuki, President of Suzuki Industries

tasked with championing the philosophy and spearheading the change to a more people-centric management system. "Lean is simple," says Nigel. "It's about working smarter not harder."

The inspiration for adopting this approach came after NML's Managing Director Lees Seymour returned from a business trip last year. "Lees came back talking about Lean manufacturing and it struck a chord with me. These were some of the things I'd aspired to achieving but I'd never been able to put an exact name or philosophy to it.

"The management philosophy that people refer to as Lean comes from Toyota so it lends itself to a factory/manufacturing type system. The challenge for us is to adapt and apply the philosophy and processes to the forestry industry. If you drill down far enough we are a manufacturing business – manufacturing logs from our forest – our forest is really our warehouse and factory, so you have to really step back and look at what we do in an abstract way."

Prior to their trip to Japan Nigel and Gerald were concerned that their understanding of the Lean Manufacturing System was possibly more of a Westernised construct of the Toyota Production System. They were keen to go to the origin point and learn from the Japanese themselves.

Nigel and Gerald spent ten days in Japan as part of a group tour hosted by Shinka Management and Simply Lean Business Solutions. The group received teaching from Akinori Hyodo, Shinka Management's Senior Consultant and former Toyota Japan factory manager.

As part of the tour they visited various businesses to see *Kaizen* principles in action, including a steel manufacturer, a flour-milling plant, a green tea and coffee production company, and various automotive plants.

"The key thing we learned is that it's not complicated," says Gerald. "We overcomplicate things, and people don't respond well to an overcomplicated approach.

"Right at the start we learned two main concepts. Firstly, if there's a problem you stop. Secondly, you don't make what you don't need. Those are the two main guiding philosophies of Toyota that help them to become successful. If you do those two things well and if the businesses you deal with and align yourself with do it well also, then in theory you should be a very competitive, sustainable company."

"As an example," says Nigel, "Toyota do not quality control check deliveries from their suppliers. Approved suppliers are following the Toyota Production System, and so they are expected to have done these checks themselves. Re-checking would be seen as a form of *Muda* (waste)."

Their experience in Japan highlighted that one of the main challenges of implementing the new system in New Zealand is the psychological shift required to implement the Lean tools in our workplaces. Lean involves a new way of thinking and a shift from a blame culture to an ideas culture. It requires making workplaces spaces where people are not afraid to speak up if there is a problem.

In an industry such as forestry, where the ability to speak up is crucial for the safety of all workers, there are huge

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**BUSINESS PERFORMANCE**  
**ANALYST - NML**

benefits that come from creating an ideas culture.

"In Kiwi culture we have a feeling that we are letting others down if we interrupt the process, whereas the Japanese have empowered people to stop immediately if they see something that isn't right. And from what we saw there was no fear of doing just that. People were actively encouraged to speak up as soon as they saw a problem, and were not blamed in any way. The onus is on the supervisors to correctly train and develop the people working under them – apart from helping the people they are supervising to do a good job, the supervisors know that they can't advance unless someone has been trained to replace them," says Nigel.

Their experience in Japan also made it clear to Nigel and Gerald that Lean needs to be implemented from the top down and requires the full commitment of the business' leadership team.

"We are fortunate that we do have that support," says Gerald. "Now we need to take what we have learned and use it. We realise that calling it Lean is possibly not helpful because it's not a system that is implemented and then left to take care of itself. It's about continuous improvement and ongoing awareness."

[ Nelson Forests Ltd owns 78,000 hectares of forest in the Nelson, Tasman, and Marlborough regions. More than 600 people are employed across the Nelson Forests business, and the company handles 55,000m<sup>3</sup> of timber sales annually. Nelson Management Ltd is the management company for Nelson Forests Ltd and is owned by Global Forests Partners LP.]

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