THE FASHION CHALLENGE

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The Fashion Challenge.
**Day 1**

The rain was dripping down her freshly polished shoes as Linda stepped out of the car, the weather only reinforcing her feeling of having made a mistake. As she arrived at the massive glass doors, her stomach began to tremble, and her throat grew dry. She again flicks through her list of reasons as to why she took this job in the first place. The money, the location and the career prospects. This asserts her in her decision, but does not hide the fact that she has picked a challenge of which she is not sure she can complete. Her fear turns to excitement as she starts walking through the opening glass doors. The walls are white and shiny; everything is white and shiny! She feels as though she is being consumed by one of those sleek fashion magazines she once read. Just over the reception she sees in big letters, ‘Apart Fashion’.

“Apart Fashion, one of the biggest Fashion houses on the entire planet’”, Linda thinks to herself.

Linda had been working as a production specialist at one of the ‘state-of-the-art’ production facilities owned and operated by Apart Fashion. After only a couple of years, Linda had been noticed and appreciated for her process knowledge, with most of her projects being highly successful. This was exactly the reason as to why she was offered the position at the headquarters of Apart Fashion. Under the title of ‘Lean Master’, Linda was responsible for focusing efforts on improving the existing design processes. Even though Linda
was only in her late twenties, she has already acquired heaps of experience working with Lean, and had committed herself to qualifying for every Lean qualification there was available. However, Linda had never had any interest in the business side of fashion, let alone design.

Snapping out of her thoughts, Linda quickly realizes that there is now little time to question herself. Having arrived at the reception, Linda was met and greeted by a sleek, pencil-skirt wearing women who proceeded to guide her up the vast central stairway. She was instructed to take a seat in front of a glass box.

Linda began to observe her surroundings as she was waiting and noticed that the entire floor consisted of these quirky glass cubicles. She knew there were around 300 designers at ‘Apart Fashion’, a majority located in this office. However, the department she was going to be part of only covered 30 designers. The people running between the cubicles made Linda think back to the ant-colony experiment she did at school; and the moment somebody left the top open and the whole classroom was swamped by tiny little ants!

Snapping back to reality, Linda notices the transparent doors opening and a friendly looking woman approaching. She appears way too curvy for her dress and with every step, wobbles like a big bowl of jelly - the exact opposite of the cold, meager looking ladies who are now walking around in-between the cubicles. Once inside the nominated cubicle, Linda unexpectedly finds herself drawn into a hug which seems to encompass her with body mass. Feeling a little uncomfortable, she manages to pull herself out of the
embrace. This person introduces herself as Karla. She has a strong Spanish accent, made stronger by her full, powerful voice. Though Linda feels overwhelmed, she feels comfortable with Karla.

Karla explains that she is one of the designers with which Linda will be working with, and that their manager has had to attend an urgent meeting in London and will likely not be in work for the rest of the week. The way Karla mentions this to Linda makes it sound like this is quite a regular occurrence.

As the initial meeting draws to an end, gratitude’s are given, and Linda is led away to the glass cubicle which will be hers from now on. The large lady quickly scurries away as she hears her phone ringing through the adjacent open doors.

Sitting there feeling a little bored, having received no instructions or guidance, Linda starts exploring throughout the hallway. She greets some people on the way, getting the odd “hi” back. Quickly Linda notices the walls and tables are covered in pictures, and also the hurry in which everybody seems to be. People are discussing so loudly that she is able to eardrop on conversations through the walls and doors. Linda decides she likes this open floor plan and glass cubicle layout; as a lean practitioner, transparency is extremely important to her.

In the afternoon however, Linda is shocked by the inefficiency she experiences within the companies HR office!
Arriving for work on her second day, Linda feels more confident and is actually excited about the first of many team meetings she has planned in her calendar. At 08:50 she heads towards the room nominated in the outlook invite. The second person to arrive for the scheduled 09:00 meeting strolls in at 09:10, the third a couple of minutes later. The last person arrived at 09:17. One last minute cancellation and one unexplained absence complete the role of invited attendees. After a quick introduction, a discussion is formed amongst the employees regarding the absence of their colleagues, as well as that of their manager. Nobody has any idea why the manager travelled to the UK; there is some gossip that she might have gone shopping.

Finally, by 09:30, everybody starts to settle down and they begin unloading piles of pictures which are then stuck onto the large, but cluttered operations wall. Karla wonders how organized the pictures are as they are constantly being moved around, or added, only to be removed again. Linda determines that the purpose of this wall is to aid in the alignment of the various fashion designers.

“This is for spring, right?” Linda overhears one person asking.

This person receives Linda’s silent vote for the least prepared attendee!
Thirty minutes after the late starting time of the meeting, the walls are now covered with pictures of people from the past and present, and some of which who may as well be from the future! It is clear that they have quickly run out of space and they had then begun covering the tables. Linda is surprised that anybody was able to see any kind of pattern amongst this mess.

Megan, one of Linda’s new colleagues, speaks up “Ok, let’s do this!”.

She observes everybody staring at the walls, overwhelmed just as Linda was on her first day.

“I see a lot of flares”, one mentions.

“Really? Bordeaux is coming back?” asks another.

“How about we do Aubergine flares?” enquires a third, who’s obviously concerned with making both parties happy.

“Retail wanted something more classic, right?”.

“That’s difficult. I spoke with Greg from the wholesale department and they are looking for a young and sporty look”.

5
They keep on discussing for another hour walking out annoyed and unhappy with the result which looks a little classic, but not too classic so they can still sell it through wholesale. Some of the ideas made perfect sense to Linda, but most of them seemed a little random. They decide to have another meeting next week, hoping they will get more direction until then.
Day 3

On her third day, Linda’s new previously absent manager Manon suddenly arrives. In accordance with the company’s internal dress code, Manon presents herself outfitted in a plainly coloured pencil skirt and simple heels. Linda picks up on her rushing in and around, whirling up papers as she races by. Linda observes Manon patiently for 25 minutes or so until she comes rushing into her office. Rushing seems to epitomize Manon’s entire personality. Her words are spoken hastily like a waterfall, with a strong French accent making it slightly more difficult to maintain an understanding of what is being said.

Linda had only met Manon once previously which was at her initial interview. She was being interviewed by a HR employee named Menar, when Manon rushed in, grabbed Linda’s resume, and asked her a couple of questions having briefly scanned the piece of paper in her hand for barely two minutes. This was followed by a quick “I’ll be in touch with you”, and a hasty departure. The HR lady continued with the remainder of the interview process. Linda was surprised how Menar, who is employed in the HR department, was not entirely sure about which position she was actually hiring Linda for. This position was not a typically traditional position, in the way that a designer or merchandiser is for example. This meant that Linda was still not totally sure of what it is exactly that she was hired to do. Judging by what Manon had so far mentioned, it seemed as though the management team at Apart Fashion had decided to incorporate
‘Lean’ into their business. Manon mentioned that the company had heard how it was possible to save some money by doing so, and as Manon had little time amongst her current responsibilities as it stood, Linda was hired to ‘do’ some Lean projects.

“Just do some Lean projects! As long you save us some money, we are happy”, she said.

It was obvious that Manon did not really care how Linda was going to accomplish this. She realized she had only been hired to please leadership. Manon wasn’t even trying to hide that assumption! When Manon left after 30 minutes, Karla seemed a little frustrated; but also relieved of her diminished responsibility.

Linda decides to do some Lean projects which would cause minimal disturbance to the rest of the team. This will ensure that they will also leave her alone.

Linda starts with a simple ‘5S’ exercise. She repeats the 5S procedures in her head,

“Sort, set in order, shine, standardize and sustain”.

She favors this exercise as it delivers fast results without investing too much time. She sets the meeting rooms as a starting point, where she displays which tools should be made available. She installs neat and presentable boxes for cello tape, with which employees will use to stick their pictures onto the walls. A box was made for board markers with which to write on the glass, and so on. She had realized in the meeting beforehand that it took the employees a long
time to find equipment in the office rooms. She was sure that the employees would appreciate the 15 minutes they would save at each meeting which they would normally waste searching for equipment. However, after few days, Linda realized that the boxes were empty, and the equipment remained scattered around the tables and floor. The tape was rarely refilled.

Slightly frustrated, Linda moved on to her next project; Standardization. Linda developed a standard template with which to communicate employee design proposals. Everybody has their own artistic freedoms and mediums, and it was difficult to compare A3 formats with those using A5 format. Detailed pencil sketches differed hugely with more colorful types of expression, different physiques of the mannequins/persons, some of which could well be confused with aliens!

Linda employed a simple standardized outline of a body on an A4 sheet of paper. All the designers needed to do was draw their clothing designs onto it.

“Easy peasy!” Linda says to herself; “Nothing can go wrong with that”.

She sends the new template, attached to an e-mail, explaining how the idea should work. Again, a few days later, she sees that nobody has made any effort to even discuss the idea, let alone use it. From one day to the next, Linda becomes more and more frustrated with the lack of enthusiasm towards her ideas. She feels useless; without purpose. However, she is glad that nobody is bothering her.
Day 30

One month later and nothing substantial has changed. Linda is still working on a project which doesn’t seem to be making any difference; then her phone rings. Unsuspecting, Linda answers the phone; “In my office”, comes a voice spoken sternly and indicating an uncomfortable urgency. The phone falls dead with a click. The French accent allows Linda to assume it is Manon. Linda grabs her papers and the project files that she had generated during her brief time at Apart Fashion, and rushes to Manon’s glass cubicle. Linda realizes that this is the first time she had visited Manon in her office since the day she had started. From the outside she spots two men and two women, one of whom is Manon. She doesn’t seem her usual confident self. Linda quickly realizes that Manon being nervous cannot be a good sign.

When Linda entered the room, all eyes were on her.

“Linda, may I introduce you to Robert Burton, Steve Madison and Beth Gallagher?” Manon begins.

“They would like to ask you some questions”.

Linda could not be more nervous. She felt as though she stood before a grand jury; her breathing became hesitant. She breathed deeply, straightened herself up, and answered in a calm voice,

“Nice to meet you, I would be happy to answer your questions”,
She reached her hand across to greet them, but there was no time for pleasantries.

“You have been employed here at Apart Fashion for one month Linda, correct?, How have you been so far?”.

Mr. Burton’s voice comes across surprisingly softly for a man with his broad physique.

“I’m doing well Mr. Burton, thanks for asking.” “Linda is just completing her fifth Lean project.” Manon answered for her which made her realize Mr. Burton wasn’t just asking through interest in only her own well-being.

“What have you achieved?” enquires Beth, a woman with a pointy nose who stood next to Mr. Burton.

This question came as a surprise to Linda. She looked to Manon, who appeared to have already recently endured a similar inquisition.

“We have used Lean projects to optimize design operations”, Linda eventually explains.

“By how much have you improved our operations?” comes Beth’s squeaky voice again.

Working in manufacturing and measuring the effect of her projects had been easy for Linda. She had only been working with stable processes and any changes in output could be allocated to the improvement effort. In design however, it was different. Designers were working on many different projects, across many different seasons, all at the
same time; the process was messy and unstable. Without a stable process it was difficult to associate which results were due to individual processes or projects, and which were associate with the over-time of one of the designers. Linda had assumed it wasn’t something which was a possibility, and as nobody had asked, she had not measured it.

Shocked by her own ignorance, Linda mumbles “It is difficult to measure the exact effect of a Lean project based only on the process.”

“Which metrics are you using Linda?” Mr. Burton asks instantly.

“Metrics? In Design?” Linda wonders. Linda hadn’t even been aware that designers were using metrics.

Mr. Burton picks-up on her confused look and continues and explains that they were slowly starting to lose market share. By the time they brought out a style another cheaper brand already had done so. They had to add more seasons and more collections without adding more resources to keep up with their competitors. Some were working with as much as 24 seasons a year.

“We need to be the first on the market with the right offer.” He concludes.

Linda is shocked, 24 seasons a year, that’s two weeks per season, and currently they were working with only 8 seasons a year.
“We are coping with increasing pressure from competitors. They are producing with lower costs and faster lead-times. We need to find a way to better compete, and grow! We thought we could lead this transformation by ourselves, but as I see this is not possible”.

“Linda has barely been with us a month, give her some time to prove herself” says Manon.

Linda is pleasantly surprised by Manon’s sudden motivation and loyalty. All eyes are on Mr. Burton; he seems to be making the decisions. Steve, who had remained silent for the duration of the meeting, suddenly spoke up,

“I think Manon is right Robert, give her more time to prove herself”.

After 5 minutes, which seemed like an eternity! Mr. Burton asks Linda

”Do you think you can do it? Can you decrease the lead time for the Product development process by 30%?”

It is a lot he is asking for; the current process is around 6 months and they often struggle to finish even by that time schedule. 30% would mean a decrease in lead times from 180 days to 126 days. That was a reduction of 54 days. A quick glance at the look on Manon’s demanding face gives Linda her answer;

“It is possible”.

“Ok, you have 2 months to show us a 30% improvement” he answers immediately.

Whilst Linda worked in manufacturing, some individual projects had already seen a 15% improvement in lead-time. But she had no idea how to translate this into the design process. The rest of the meeting passed by Linda in a blur of thoughts. Manon assumed command while Linda contemplated a multitude of possibilities, and came to the realization that she may have taken on more than she could handle.

When Mr. Burton, Steve and Beth had left, it was only Manon and Linda who remained in the meeting room. After a long period of uncomfortable silence, Manon cleared her throat.

“Linda, do you realize that if you do not succeed, we may both be out of a job?”

The gravity of the situation had not been interpreted clearly by Linda. She had always provided a good service and often impressed her superiors.

“We *must* make it work Linda!” Manon continues, “I will make this a top priority and you will have my full support throughout. I will ask Karla to assist you with all design related questions. She has a lot of experience and is an important person to be able to call upon”.
Day 31

The following day, Linda finds a meeting scheduled for early on in her day. When Linda enters the meeting room, the entire floor staff is there. Everybody! Linda has never seen all of the employees in the same place, at the same time. Linda quickly realizes this meeting is likely linked to yesterday’s meeting.

“Hi all, and thanks for coming”, Manon opens with once everybody has arrived and settled, “I asked for you all to attend this meeting today because we have a huge challenge ahead of us”.

After a brief pause, she continues to address her audience,

“We need to decrease our lead-times for design by 30%, and we need to reach this target within 2 months, which is a reduction of 54 days”.

Quiet and localized mumbling develops, but this rapidly turns into a full blown discussion, everybody wants to voice their opinions, and it doesn’t sound like they are agreeable opinions.

“Ladies and gentlemen, calm down! It is not like we have a choice”, Manon sighs.

She starts explaining the issues the company is facing, just as Mr. Burton had done the day before.
“However, I believe we can do it, we all just need to work together”.

To Linda’s surprise the noise stops, and people start to nod in agreement. There are still some very skeptical looking faces, but they may just have the team on board with them. Linda was surprised by how easy that had appeared to happen. This situation triggered memories Linda had about something called the ‘burning platform’. If your organization is not familiar with change, quite often if a serious problem occurs, this helps to pull people out of inertia and into a progressive and productive frame of mind.

Although, Apart Fashion has no current financial troubles, Mr. Burton’s ultimatum has inadvertently created a ‘burning platform’; an issue that is not possible to solve with conventional management practices and it needed immediate attention.

“Linda will have the Lead”. Manon’s voice pulls Linda from her thoughts.

“Me, the Lead?”, Linda thinks to herself. Not really what she was looking for.

“Please follow Linda’s instructions to the detail, and if any problems arise please do not hesitate to come directly to either Linda or myself, this is of the highest priority”.

Following the meeting, Manon asks Linda to stay behind for a moment.
“What’s your plan, Linda?” Manon asks.

Obviously, Linda had been thinking about exactly that, but she was still nervous to voice her opinion. “We can start with some projects to cut waste, these will provide fast results. But to reduce lead-times by 30%! We might need to approach it differently”.

Linda begins by explaining to Manon the principles upon which the Lean Management Methodology is based. She informs her that Lean is about eliminating waste within processes, and that waste is defined directly by the consumer. Any actions which the consumer is not willing to pay for is therefore wasteful, and as such should be eliminated. It was quite a crash course in Lean for Manon, who was able to quickly learn and make sense of it all. ‘Lean principles are best learnt through experience anyhow!’ Linda thought to herself.

After that, she explained the ‘A3’ process they had been using in manufacturing, which allowed them to solve issues or to implement strategies. A3 was a structured approach very much about finding root-causes and putting an action plan in place as remediation.

“So, it’s called A3 because of the size of the paper?” Manon asks.

Linda explains that by ensuring that all important information on a project is documented on one single A3 sized paper, then everything was made simpler and easier because it
was all visible in the same place, and it limited the information visible intentionally to just the most important parts. She explains the different individual sections, each separately labelled with the statements; ‘goal, cause analysis, countermeasures, implementation and follow-up’.

“Makes sense” Manon notes.

She picks up her phone, 30 seconds later Karla walks in.

“Let’s do this now” Manon says, enthusiastically searching for an A3 sized piece of paper; they start using the back of a picture.

Karla gets the same 10 minutes crash course which Manon received, only this time from Manon herself. Sometimes Linda is required to add some detail, but she’s glad Manon seems to have adopted her idea. Karla also thinks it sounds fairly logical.
Day 32

They begin with a theme at the head of the page; “What do we want to accomplish?” Linda asks.

She recites perfectly from memory; she had been using A3’s for years and knew the templates inside out.

“30% decrease in lead-time, right?” Karla screams in the room like a child, excited to know the answer of a difficult question. “But what are we going to do?” Linda continues calmly.

She knows the answers but remembers her coach’s words; ‘What makes a great leader is to lead people, to find their own answers, instead of just giving it to them and telling them what to do’.

Now Linda was the leader, and since she was taught by an excellent leader, she now decided to follow the same path.

“We need to revamp the Design process in order to speed it all up” replies Karla, who is obviously very excited about this exercise.

It was probably not the perfect way of beginning, but they started to write it down anyway. ‘Maybe it would become clearer the more they worked on it’, Linda said to herself. Sometimes small iterative changes are more effective than looking for perfection.
“Ok, now moving on to the problem situation. What is the standard we are striving for?”

They engage in discussion for at least the following 10 minutes before eventually, they decide that they are seeking a streamlined and efficient design process which leaves space for creativity, and which takes no longer than 126 days. The current situation was the opposite; a messy process with very long lead-times.

“So, what’s the goal?” Linda keeps going, she wants to thrive on this enthusiasm while it lasts.

“Decrease lead time by 30%” Manon answers this time.

“Ok, what other details do we need in the goal, remember to make it SMART”.

SMART, the acronym for ‘specific, measurable, accepted, realistic and timely’, was a term often used by her old team but apparently one which Karla and Manon had never heard of it.

“Ok, let’s make it SMART”, Karla confirms after the explanation. “Decrease lead times in the product development process by August 2015” Manon corrects herself.
Linda starts appreciating the Socratic method of asking questions instead of giving the answers. She now understands her coach; not only does this method of asking and answering questions stimulate critical thinking and promote ideas, it also results in immediate alignment of ideas and buy-in’s. In the end, it’s their own ideas, so why should they be opposed to it?

“How is the cause of this mess?” asks Linda.

She continues guiding them through the A3 problem solving process.

“Isn’t it just the nature of a design process?” Karla asks.

“What do you think is the aim of this process?” replies Linda.

“To design a product that fits the specifications of management, right?” Karla says a little unsure, the question was so easy there must have been a hidden angle.

“Try to think a little further. What does management base their opinions on?”

“Ah, it’s obviously the specifications of the consumer.” Manon says.

“So, do you think that at the moment every step you are doing is valuable to the consumer? Do you think they would be willing to pay for 20 versions of a single design?” asks Linda.
“All they want is one design that fits exactly their wishes, they don’t care how often you had to re-do it” comes a confident reply from Manon.

“Do you still think that’s just how the design process is? That there is no way we can eliminate waste in this process and speed it up?” questions Linda rhetorically.

Karla looks a little embarrassed when she admits that there are probably quite some inefficiencies in the process if you look at it form a consumer standpoint.

“We mentioned earlier that the problem is a messy process with very long lead-times.”, Linda continues. “Do we still agree with this?”

Nodding from both sides is the answer.

“So what do you think are the root causes?” No answer forces Linda to remember the 5Why’s exercise from back in her training, to stimulate root-cause thinking.

“Why do we have a messy process with very long lead-times?”

“Nobody knows what to do, when to do it, and everybody has way to much work on”, Karla answers.

”Why?” Linda asks again.

“Over 50% of the designs our team works on do not result in approval from management in the end. We need to redo it all over again” Karla notes.
Linda thinks about the effect that this has on the workload of designers; 50% of their work is waste. “Samples from the manufacturers are never how we want them to be. It takes a lot of time for them to send us the revised samples” Karla continues. After continuing to ask ‘why’, they come to the conclusion that the root cause is that there is no streamlined standard process for designing, as well as unclear communication and no defined roles & responsibilities.

“What are we going to do about this?” Linda keeps the ball rolling.

It took them nearly two hours to get to where they are now and she soon realizes that this can become a very exhausting process. But not too much longer! Putting their thoughts into action is going to be much more fun, but at the same time, a lot more challenging.

“We might need to rethink the entire fashion design process.” Manon states a little shocked. “But from a customer’s perspective, right?” Karla adds.

“Exactly!”

Linda is proud of her two students. They decide together that they will do this immediately the same afternoon.

“And long-term, what do you think we should do?” asks Linda.

“Long-term? We only have 2 months, right?” Karla states.
Linda realizes that they were still yet to grasp the essence of continuous improvement and, even if they make this challenge, she has a nagging feeling that Mr. Burton is not going to stop there. For the time being she keeps her thoughts to herself.

“Let’s split it up a little more. What do we need to do exactly?” Linda asks.

They agree that first they need to meet with the entire team in order to redesign the entire process.

“Who’s going to be the owner of this project?”

“The owner?” Karla asks.

“Yes, the person who is responsible of the timely completion and facilitation of the project”.

“Isn’t it all of us? Aren’t we all going to work on it at the same time?” Karla looks surprised.

Linda explains that, although everybody is partially responsible, each individual track needs an owner to delegate tasks, so that in case a problem arises, it is clear who is responsible for directing a solution.

“That’s normally me! I facilitate meetings, workshops and projects” Manon explains.

“Wow, this must be a stretch on your time.” Linda says surprised “What do they do when you are travelling?” she enquires. Manon explains that whenever she is absent from
work, the designers usually work only on some day-to-day tasks and make preparations for the feedback sessions.

“Nobody else has project management experience” Manon tries to justify.

“And how are they supposed to learn without being given responsibility?” Linda says surprised,

Manon struggles to find a better solution and agrees, “Can I be the owner of this one” Karla asks. “I’ve got quite a bit of process knowledge and I would like to learn how to facilitate a workshop in this way”.

They keep on going through this, adding further action items, owners and deadlines to the list. They decide that in order to facilitate communication they will need to change the team structure and to update roles & responsibilities accordingly. The action items presently stand a little vague, but they are hoping to make it more concrete following this first session.

“And how will we check if we improved?” Linda asks.

“We can check at the end of each design cycle, right?” Manon mentions.

“But we only have 2 months. If we going to measure a six months process?” Karla says rightly.

“Exactly. Any ideas on how we could solve this?” asks Linda.
After thinking for a while, Manon comments, “If we come up with a new process this afternoon, we can put markers in place by which we can use to plan and to stay on track, week by week, to ensure we finish each particular step in a timely manner. These milestones will incorporate our total target of 126 days. If we are behind at any stage, it will be noticed early on and we can adjust our plan”.

Since we are running various collections in different design stages we can test various stages of the process simultaneously and then add it together. “Linda is impressed. Through experience she had learned that measuring the status of a project and the outcome are really important. Projects are far more successful, and are managed more timely, if they are continuously compared to the target. Without doing this you may end up with a project outcome that is unsatisfactory, but have realized about it far too late to be able do anything about it.

Having completed the draft version of the A3 and assigning Manon as being responsible for updating that draft with new insights, they decide to treat themselves to lunch at a restaurant nearby.

“I’m very surprised how far we got today.” Manon states.

She explains that when she has worked previously closely alongside leadership on new strategies, it often takes months until they come up with the first draft.

“It is all about focus” Linda explains.
By observing her colleagues, it was obvious to Linda just how overloaded with work they were, and how they habitually lost focus. She imagined it was likely going to be as bad or worse when it came to management. She recalls a book written by Don Reinertsen, called the ‘The Principles of Product Development Flow’. It states that if a system is worked to anything near its maximum capacity, you will get little to nothing done. There is a tradeoff between resource efficiency and delivery speed. Reducing works in progress from 90% of your maximum capacity to 89% will result in a 28% faster delivery speed. Limiting works in progress to 85% of capacity, makes you 54% faster. Doing a little less could mean you can produce much more, much faster.

When Linda thinks about this, she realizes that the human brain, and its capabilities, also have a maximum capacity. It may be a little more flexible than that of a machines; it’s Operating Systems, but out of experience she could see that the above statement bears some truth.

When Linda explains this theory to Manon and Karla, they nod enthusiastically.

“Yes, in fashion there is an unspoken rule which states that if you are not running around, then you are lazy. There is so much competition that in-between meetings with management, we try to produce as many designs as possible just to stay busy.” Karla explains.

This realization gives them enough motivation and energy to come back in the afternoon to work on the future state process.
When Manon enters the room she looks surprised. Linda had taken down all of the pictures which were pinned along the entire wall of the meeting room, and put tool boxes on the tables. The toolboxes were filled with different colored post-it, as well as different coloured marker pens. Manon had invited the whole team, but as usual, most of them arrived 15 minutes late.

Linda had been through the workshop facilitation with Karla beforehand, however, time was short, and Linda can now only hope Karla had understood the point. Karla went quickly through the workshop rules, then stuck them up as print-outs on the wall. The first one read ‘Be on time’, then ‘Show respect to others’, ‘No phones or computers’, and the last one, ‘Think-out-of-the-box’. She then went through the A3 they had created in the morning, and the status relevant to the stage they were at in the project. She then explained the objective of the meeting and the result they were aiming for.

Linda is again impressed. Karla seems comfortable. Manon is also positively surprised by Karla’s initiative and appreciates the common understanding.

“We usually start with inspirational trips.” One colleague states when they start the process mapping exercise.

The word ‘usually’ had always annoyed Linda. It was the enemy of continuous process improvement. Just because you ‘used’ to do things that way, doesn’t mean it’s the best way to do it now.
“One second, how about we start this exercise from the end of the design process, from the consumer?” Manon asks.

This was a great idea. Apparently she has learnt a lot from the morning. It also would help the attendees to think out of the box and not only recite their current process. Some people seem a little confused, but agree after Manon elaborates further.

“Ok, so what does the customer want?”

While discussing this, they realize that there is a lot of information available from the marketing departments research, most of which they had not been using. To keep the process going, Manon calls the marketing department to send a person to offer support to them by providing their customer knowledge and skills. Mark from Marketing arrived 10 minutes later; he was the only one available on such short notice. However, he did a great job in explaining who their customers were. These were his own opinions, but he supported them with enough examples and data for it to be convincing and that it made sense. Marketing had communicated the data regularly with the designers, but they had trouble interpreting it, as well as limited time to actually properly evaluate it. Mark was able to pack all of this into 10 minutes.

They then discussed what was needed in order for them to satisfy their customers, which moved them closer to the ‘start’ of the process. The result was a process which was only a fraction of the time, compared with old one.
“It’s so short”, one of the colleagues states the obvious. “You think that will work? I feel like we forgot loads”.

“Let’s make it work”, Linda answers confident.

The next few days are chaos, as well prepared as they could be, there was always going to be a lot of questions. Since they were working on various collections, and different people were working on different stages of the design process, it wasn’t exactly a smooth transition, but more of a bumpy ride!

Some collections were at a stage which was just prior to completion, others had only just started. Most would undergo the same steps which other collections were also currently undergoing. Linda was very nervous, this was a big chance and it was quite obvious that not everything always worked how it was planned. It had been quite a broad framework starting with the 15 major steps they had mapped out. They came to Linda to seek advice about what to do, but she obviously did not have enough process knowledge to answer all of their questions.

Karla invited the whole team to another meeting the following day.

“I see we are having difficulties with implementing our plan.”

The crowd nods.
“Ok. I have spoken with the management team and they approved to give us their full and undivided support as way of a test. At whatever stage you are at, you have full autonomy to manage it yourself. At the end of this day everybody will be informed that this ‘project’ has first priority.”

Karla who passed her idea by Linda and Manon, had seen Mr. Burton to request his direct support. He liked the idea to run this project as a trial project, but only gave them 4 weeks to come up with a stable process.

Their idea was to form teams dependent on the current stage of the design process in which they were in. They then could manage that step in a manner which they see fit. They could ask for information from any department they see relevant, who must handle that request with priority.

The same is applied to management.

Employees were allowed to request feedback from management whenever they thought it was necessary. Management was not entirely happy about this; they were responsible for the management of 300 designers, this project being only a fraction of that number, with 30 designers. However, Mr. Burton’s request was clear; ‘this project was priority’.

The only guideline the teams received was that they were required to complete each individual step within 8 days, and that they had to document the way they were working.
After 8 days each team moved on to the next step where they now received the information from the previous team that had just undergone that step. They could now decide if they had followed the instructions, if the instructions require adjustments to them, or that they need to completely start over.

Each team managed their tasks differently to begin with, but after one month, and having had each step tested and revised 15 times, the result was a stable process, with input and buy-in from everybody.

“It is kind of like a speedy version of best-practice sharing.” Manon says laughing after being relieved that the process was at least half-way stable.

Everything had changed. Before the start of a new collection, the management team had to deliver clear guidelines of what was expected and revised by marketing and all sales teams. They had developed a simple standard template to facilitate customer profile for each sales channel and put deliverables behind it. It was now clear what was needed and especially, ‘why’ it was needed. In the old process information only reached the designers half way through the design process, which left them hurrying to integrate the changes. The designers, with help of marketing and the input from management at the beginning, had all the information they needed to make decisions about the designs and therefore felt real ownership.
The management team was unhappy with the result. Although it drastically decreased their workload, they felt like they lost control over the design. Some even attempted to jeopardize the entire process and kept on complaining about the outcomes.

The design team however believed in the new way of doing things; they had a lot more time to focus on making the perfect design, instead of waiting for approval. They had a lot more information on their hands and they knew what was expected of them from the beginning.
Day 64

Just one month after Roberts visit, the design team had made huge improvements. The atmosphere was great they felt like they were actually creating again and not just looking for answers. However, Linda grew nervous. Not even one month was left and the lead time decreased only to 140 days. It was a great achievement to knock out 40 days of the product development schedule. However, brainstorming about further improvements they could not find a project that could knock off the left-over 14 days of their lead-time. Most of the process was not in their hands, but in the manufacturers supplying the samples. The first sample was never how they wanted it and they had to send it back to the manufacturers with comments who then had to fabricate a new sample. Samples had to be revised usually 3 times before it could go into regular production but it took manufacturers very long to fabricate them and send them over. Linda estimated that nearly 3 months of lead-time were lost through the suppliers. They had been struggling to respond to the old timelines, obviously they wouldn’t be able to respond even quicker.

She decided to call Mr. Burton.
“Hello Mr. Burton”

“Hello Linda, how are you doing?” his voice as calming and friendly as last time.

“We are doing well. We have decreased the lead-time by 40 days to 140 days.”

“This is great news. But I guess from your call that you came across some problems?” he asks.

“Yes. A large part of the process is not in our hand, it’s dependent on the manufacturers. We might not be able to hit the 126 lead time in the time frame given by you. I talked to the manufacturers and they are not able to produce any faster” she explains.

“Not able or not willing? You are from the manufacturing sector. How long does it actually take to make and ship a product?”

“I guess only a fraction of 3 months. But samples are not a priority. They move to the bottom of the list because of the small quantities, they have a lower margin.”

“Do you know why we need to speed up the process?” he doesn’t leave her time to answer and continues: “The fast fashion retailers we are competing with have on average a mark-down of 15-20%. Here at ‘Apart Fashion’ it can get as high as 50%. Every day we can save in lead-time has a direct effect on our competitiveness and factors like mark-downs. And this is just one example.”
Linda wasn’t really sure what he was going for. What had the mark-down to do with her issue? It was way further in the process and out of her responsibility.

“Think about it Linda. Call me back when you have an idea. I got to go now. Good luck.”

“Thanks” was the only thing she could say before the line dropped.
Day 65

The whole night Linda had been thinking about what Mr. Burton said but couldn’t get anywhere. However, she had another idea. Not sure if it would save much time, it was at least worth a try. She realized that the manufacturers where the constraint of the process. She remembered that in manufacturing the constraint is the step that is limiting the output of the entire process. The weakest link, she says to herself. However fast all other steps would work, they would always need to wait for the samples to arrive. The idea was therefore to subordinate all other steps to the constraint and try to support it as much as possible.

The afternoon she spends brainstorming with the team on how they could support the manufacturers. Some designers had much more time on their hands as a result of the new process. They could use it to support other functions that could need it. They worked on clearer guidelines and included more information that was relevant to the manufacturers. Their designs often were variations of old designs. Although the manufacturers knew that it was difficult to determine which exact style it was based on. The design team was including that information and more specific guidelines. For some products they even decided to produce little mock-ups at their office. They also asked the fabric suppliers to send the swatches to them earlier so the manufacturing process was never delayed due to waiting for the fabric samples. In close contact with the manufacturers they were discussing what they could do to make their job easier and faster.
It had a bigger effect as anticipated. The suppliers appreciated their effort and send the samples much earlier. Additionally, some samples only needed to be revised once. However, they designers still needed to get used to the idea of having less samples. They reduced the lead-time to 128 days, 2 days short of the expected lead-time, exactly 3 days before the deadline. It was not enough time to start a new project and the team was already overwhelmed with changes, they needed time to adjust. She knew that Mr. Burton would not be happy with her not hitting the target of 126 days. Especially after her not figuring out what he meant with the mark-down.

At night, half in her dreams it suddenly hit her. The product development department was only one step in a whole chain of steps to bring the product to the consumers. However, they were the constraint. They were the department limiting the output. Every day saved in product development resulted in the product being in the stores one day earlier. This again had huge effects on their competitiveness, sales and mark-downs. Every day saved had a direct effect on revenue therefore.

She immediately called up Mr. Burton.

“Hello, it’s Linda. I have a question.”

“Hello Linda, go on ...”

“What’s the effect of a product arriving one day earlier on the market in terms of revenue?”
He couldn’t say an exact number but when he gave her an average it still made her head explode. They had been wasting so many days in product development and every day was worth a fortune.

“Would you allow me to invest some extra money if I could make sure we get the product into production in 126 days? Maybe even earlier?” Linda asks carefully.

He asks her for some more details. He didn’t seem surprised. Just as he had been waiting for her. She breathes out slowly when she hangs up. One more hurdle deciding if she is going to win or fail.

She calls up one of the main manufacturers.

“Hello, Danish. It’s Linda.”

“Hello Linda. How are you?” he speaks with an overfriendly Indian accent. However, she likes him, his English is fairly good. She had met him before when she was working for manufacturing, but never worked directly with him.

“I am good, Danish. However, I need the samples even faster. Anything you can do about it?”

“I’m sorry Linda, we are doing everything we can. We appreciate all the information you are sending us but our shop floor is full of orders. We are swamped.” He replies, sincerely sorry.
“How about we pay you double for the samples?” Linda says confident.

“Double?” Danish says surprised. He never had a customer offering him more than he asked for. Not to mention double.

“Excuse me?”

“Yes, double” she repeats.

“I guess I need to run it by my team but I’m sure we can do something. How many days do you need it earlier?”

“5” she decides quickly, used to be bargained down. “For now! In future we are looking to trial a more co-operative environment. We have made huge improvements here, this is just the beginning.”

“Deal!” Danish says to Linda’s surprise. He obviously thinks Linda gone crazy and thinks she’s going to take it back when she comes back to her senses. When she hangs up she can feel happiness overwhelming her. When she looks up from her table she sees the whole team had gathered in front of her office. She slowly opens the door, struggling to keep a serious face. When she then breaks out in a big, happy laugh the whole team starts cheering.

“We made it” she hears from all sides.

“We haven’t just hit the target! We reduced it to 123 days.” She shouts in the crowd. It was an intense 2 months she thinks.
“Let’s go to the bar and celebrate.” She says.

“It’s not five yet” one answers.

“We totally deserve it” she hears Manon’s voice.

When she calls Mr. Burton 5 minutes later on the way to the bar, he’s not surprised but more so sounds proud. “Take some rest but call me on Monday. I have some big plans for the future, this is just the beginning.” He continues to congratulate her and she can hear in his voice that he is proud of their achievement. He finishes the conversation, offering to invite the whole team for drinks. They will cheer even louder if they hear that, Linda thinks, giving Karla a big, happy hug.

The End.