



Another Thing the Boss Is Trying

How to start lean in a real shop — with a skeptical team, no budget, and no clue what you're doing — and make it actually stick.

WHY THIS EXISTS

The book that started everything for us was cheesy. Comically cheesy. Bad clip art, a look like it was made in an afternoon, the kind of thing you'd flip through and quietly judge. I handed it around my shop anyway, and I could see it on their faces: *here we go, another thing the boss is trying*.

That silly little book changed my company. Which taught me the first real lesson before we'd even started: the magic was never in the packaging. It was in doing the work.

There are plenty of great books on lean. The one I followed — Paul Akers' *2 Second Lean* — is the field guide I'd still hand anyone. This isn't that book, and it isn't trying to be. Those books teach you the method from the mountaintop, written by people who've been at it for decades. Nobody writes the honest part: what it's actually like to *start*, from zero, with a team that never asked for this and half-expects it to blow over like everything else.

That's the only thing this book is about. Not the theory — the starting. The eye-rolls, the false starts, the person who won't get on board, the day it finally clicks. I'm not on the mountaintop. I'm a few years up the trail, turning around to tell you what I wish I'd known at the trailhead.

We're not done. Nobody ever is — that's sort of the whole idea. But we've come far enough that I can save you some pain.

1. THE EYE-ROLL

Let's start with the part every lean book skips: some of your people are not going to want to do this.

Not “need a little convincing.” Some of them will sit there, arms crossed, and give you nothing. And it's worth understanding *why*, because you respond to the reasons very differently, and getting that wrong is how most of these efforts die in the first month.

Some of it is scar tissue. You've probably tried things before that fizzled. So when you stand up and announce a new way of working, the eye-roll isn't really about your idea — it's a rational bet based on history. They've watched initiatives come and go. Why should this one be any different? That skepticism is *earned*, and the fastest way to disarm it is to admit it out loud: you have every reason to think this won't last. Then prove them wrong slowly, with small real wins, instead of with a big speech.

Some of it is armor over fear. Look at what you're actually asking people to do: change how they work, volunteer ideas, speak up in a meeting, be honest about what's not working, eventually stand in front of the whole team and teach something they don't fully understand yet. For someone who's quietly done their job for fifteen years and never said a word in a meeting, that is *terrifying*. The crossed arms aren't defiance. They're a person protecting themselves. You don't melt fear by pushing harder. You melt it with patience and with wins small enough that stepping up doesn't feel like a cliff.

And some of it — I'll just say it — is the person who's cancer to your shop. Every shop has one. The one you feel you can't live without and can't quite live with. And here's what I learned: lean doesn't create that division. It *reveals* it. When you ask everyone to participate and one person won't — out loud, every single morning — the incompatibility you'd been rationalizing for years suddenly can't be ignored. That's brutal. It's also one of the most valuable things starting will do for you, even though it doesn't feel like it at the time.

The hard truth is that when you begin, you can't always tell which is which. The armored ones look a lot like the cancer ones on day one. What sorts them is the work itself. Give it time and some of your loudest skeptics become your strongest people — the ones who'll surprise you most. That part is real: **it does come. People do get better.** Not all of them. But more than you'd bet on that first uncomfortable morning.

2. WHAT THIS EVEN IS (TWO MINUTES)

Here's the whole of lean in a paragraph, so we can get past it.

Lean is the relentless removal of waste — and waste is anything you do that the customer wouldn't pay for if they saw it. Searching for a tool. Making more than you need. Fixing mistakes. Waiting. Walking back and forth. In a normal shop, a shocking amount of the day is waste, which sounds bad until you flip it: that's your upside. That's all the room you have to get better without working harder.

That's it. That's the concept.

Now go read Paul Akers' *2 Second Lean*. He practically gives it away, and he'll teach you the method better than I can — the wastes, the tools, the mindset. I'm not going to re-teach his book, because that's his to teach and because the method was never the hard part.

And then do the thing that mattered even more for us than any book: **find the shops you can actually see yourself in**. Paul got us started, but what unlocked it was finding real companies doing this — ones my team could relate to. For us the big one was Ryan Tierney at Seating Matters. He's got a laser; so do we. A press brake; so do we. Welding areas; so do we. When my guys watched his shop, they weren't watching lean theory — they were watching *their own jobs*, done better. That collapses the distance in a way no book can. A skeptic can dismiss a

book. It's a lot harder to dismiss a shop that looks exactly like yours pulling it off.

And you don't need just one. You want a few, because different people connect to different shops. Find the one that *mirrors* you — same equipment, same work, pure recognition. Find the one that gives you *hope* — the total-mess shop that clawed its way to an unbelievable transformation, so your team thinks “if they climbed out of that, so can we.” And find the one that shows you the *ceiling* — the machine of a company that's almost impossible to keep up with, but proof of how far this goes. The mix is what carries a whole team. (I'll name the ones that did it for us at the back.)

The hard part is starting. So that's where this book stays.

3. START MICROSCOPIC

The single most important decision you'll make is how small to start. And the answer is: **smaller than feels serious.**

Paul's whole thing is the two-second improvement. Fix one tiny thing that bugs you — move the trash can two feet closer, hang the tool where your hand already reaches for it, throw out the jig you haven't touched in a year. Two seconds saved. It sounds almost stupid. That's the point. Starting microscopic is the secret, because a two-second fix is small enough that nobody's scared to try it, small enough that it can't fail, and small enough that anyone can do one today. You're not installing a system. You're building a habit — the habit of noticing what bugs you and *doing something about it* instead of stepping over it for the hundredth time.

Where most people start is cleaning up their space, and the books call this the three S's — some version of sort, sweep, straighten, standardize. Honestly? Even after years, I mix them up. The words blur together because they're taught flat, side by side, like you do them all at once. You don't. You climb them. Here's the version that finally stuck for us:

Stage one: clear it out. Go through your area and get rid of what you don't need. Not clean it — *empty* it. The tools you never use, the scrap, the old jigs, the clutter you sort through every day to find the one screwdriver that actually works. This stage takes as long as it takes. If

you're a shop that's never thrown anything away, clearing out could be weeks. That's normal. You can't organize a pile — you can only shrink it first and organize what's left.

I'll confess my own version of this. One Christmas I bought every employee a big rolling toolbox with a butcher-block top and filled it with a complete set of tools — a little of everything, so nobody would ever have an excuse to not have what they needed. I thought it was the greatest gift. You know what the first real act of lean was? *We emptied those toolboxes.* Took them back down to the handful of tools each person's job actually required. The clutter I'd handed out with the best intentions was the exact thing slowing them down. Nobody was the villain. That's usually how waste works — it comes from good intentions nobody ever questioned.

Stage two: give everything a home. Now that what's left is only what you need, decide where it lives. A shadow board. Foam cutouts. Or a nail in the wall with a Sharpie outline and a label — I mean it, that's stage two done right. You do not need to spend money. The point isn't the method, it's that every tool has one home and you can see at a glance when it's missing. You only earn this stage after stage one, because there's no sense giving a home to stuff you shouldn't own.

Stage three: make it the standard. The first two stages are things *you* do to *your* area. This one is different — it's making it hold across people and time. A labeling system so every tool knows where it belongs. A written standard so a new hire can walk in and understand how your area works without being told. The test: *if you disappeared for*

two weeks, would it stay the way you built it? Stages one and two are personal discipline. Stage three is when it stops being yours and becomes the shop's.

You don't do the three S's. You climb them. And every area in your shop is somewhere on that climb.

I'll be honest about this one, because it's the truth that'll make you trust me: **3S is the hardest thing to keep alive.** Years in, it's still what slips for us. The big exciting projects are easy. It's the daily discipline of clearing out and keeping it clear that's hard, and we fail at it and restart at it constantly. If your beautiful organized bench slides back into chaos, you're not doing it wrong. You're doing it like everyone who's ever tried.

4. THE MORNING MEETING

If you take one thing from this book, take this: **the morning meeting is the keystone.** It's the one habit that carries all the others. When the daily 3S slips — and it will — the meeting is what keeps the culture alive until you pick 3S back up.

And here's the secret to why ours has survived four years when most daily meetings die in a month: **it is not a production meeting.** The second a daily meeting becomes a status report everyone endures, it's dead. Ours touches base with each department, sure, but that's the skeleton, not the point. The point is consistency and coming together — a gathering that happens to do a little work, not a work meeting people have to sit through. We keep it to about fifteen minutes and we protect it like nothing else.

A few things we learned the hard way that keep it alive:

They build it, not me. Every day someone on the team sits at the meeting computer, researches their own topic, fills in the template, and injects their own personality into it. That's the whole game. A meeting the boss runs *at* people dies the day the boss loses steam. A meeting the team builds has as many owners as it has people. Once one of your guys turns out to be genuinely funny and everyone looks forward to his day, you've won something you can't manufacture.

I go open-book first. We put the real numbers up — sales for the day, the week, the month. When it's bad, I say it's bad and I say what I'm going to do about it. That matters more than it looks, because you cannot ask a welder to stand up and admit what's bugging him if you won't stand up and admit the month was down. Vulnerability only flows downhill from you. Lead it, and they'll follow.

Rotate who hosts — and understand what that actually does. I host Mondays; the rest of the week rotates through the team. New hires host within their first week or two. This isn't a scheduling convenience — it is the single most powerful tool I have for turning eye-rollers into participants, because it puts everyone at the front of the room, on rails, with the whole team supporting them. Guys will offer to help each other prep: *let me walk you through the template*. That's the culture pulling a new person in, with zero effort from me.

Here's my biggest regret, and I'll hand it to you free: **it took me about a year and a half to let go and let other people run the meeting, and it was the best thing I ever did — I just should have done it years sooner.** I was scared to make people do something they didn't want to do. Turns out it was no big deal, and it was exactly what grew them. You are the bottleneck longer than you think.

Never run the same meeting twice. Repetition is what kills a daily meeting, so we engineer against it. We rotate topics on purpose — improvement, learning, team and

culture, metrics, and straight-up fun. Featured improvement. Customer reviews read out loud. A gratitude round. A one-minute “what are you into” — the TV shows and books everybody’s now watching because someone shared them. The fun and culture pieces aren’t filler. They’re the reason nobody rolls their eyes anymore. It’s not a lecture. It’s the best fifteen minutes of the morning.

And one warning if you look at our meeting now: don’t copy it. What we run today has a dozen moving parts, and it would terrify a beginner. It didn’t start there. It started as “meet at 8:30, look at yesterday’s sales, five minutes of lean, share one improvement.” Everything else grew on over years. Start with the simple version and let it become its own thing. The gap between the beginner’s meeting and ours is nothing but time and reps.

The deepest reason the meeting works, though, is this. It is *easy* for me to walk into someone’s area with fresh eyes and instantly see three things that could be better. The person who stands in that spot every day is buried in the doing and can’t see any of them. The whole point of making people host, find their own waste, teach a topic — none of that is delegation. It’s me trying to give them my eyes. The morning meeting isn’t a meeting. It’s a machine for teaching your team to see the way you see.

5. DO SOMETHING TOGETHER

Small daily fixes are the foundation, but they're hard to believe in at first, because two seconds doesn't feel like anything. So early on, you also need one big, visible win — and the way you get it is simple: **find the process that sucks, put the whole team on it, and fix it together.**

For us it was packaging. We used to package everything in one cramped area — the big awkward products, the little ones, the mailboxes, all fighting for the same two tables. So we batched it, which meant setup headaches and stuff piling up. We picked it as our first real project, got the whole team around it, talked through every pain point, built an entire dedicated packing area — and took the shipping time on one of our highest-volume products from **thirty minutes to seven.** On something we do a hundred times a month. Do that math and it's staggering.

But the number wasn't even the best part. The best part was the team looking at it and thinking *look what we came up with.* That's what converts the skeptics from chapter one — not a speech, a win they built with their own hands. The first real win is worth more than everything you could say.

Here's the counterintuitive thing I learned about making time for improvement, because everybody gets this wrong. Every lean book says give your people twenty or thirty minutes a day to work on their area. So you do — and they freeze. They don't know what to do with it, or they don't have what they need, and the easy answer is

always to open the wallet: *I need a new this, I need a new that*. The hard, better answer is to be creative and solve it without spending. And the way you unlock that is to **make improvement time community time**. Don't send everyone off to their own corner. Have one person guide another. Have one department go help another department. Some days the whole shop descends on a single area and cleans it top to bottom together.

Take our screw packs. Our products need about four thousand of them a month, in a bunch of different variations, and we make every one in-house — we've never been able to justify an auto-bagging counter, so it's hands and counting. Left to one person, that job is crushing, and if it gets neglected it lands on someone's shoulders alone. So we don't leave it to one person. We get the whole crew around an eight-foot table — like a big kitchen island — and we stand on all four sides *facing each other*. And here's the thing: you might as well be at a party. Everybody's talking the whole time, the work just disappears, and it turns into community. There's relief for the person who'd have been buried in it, and there's that quiet good feeling of being the one who helped. We walk in, flatten the whole pile, and walk out — fifteen minutes, done, the area infinitely better than we found it.

Is there a leaner way to bag screws? Sure. But sometimes you just give help where help is needed. That's why we sweep the big areas of the shop together. That's why a problem too big for one person gets met by the whole team. The screw packs aren't the lesson. They're the proof of it.

One more habit worth stealing, because it keeps the questions coming: **don't be a ham.** There's an old story — a woman always cuts the ends off the ham before she cooks it, and when someone finally asks why, it goes back through the mother and the grandmother until you find the great-grandmother, whose oven was just too small. Everyone had been cutting the ends off a ham for a reason that stopped existing generations ago. We bring that up constantly. Don't do it the way you were shown just because you were shown. Question everything. Half your waste is a ham nobody's thought about in years.

6. WHAT I'D TELL YOU NOW

If I could stand next to myself in that room in 2022, right before slide one, with my whole skeptical crew staring at me, here's what I'd say.

You don't have to show the world. In my first kickoff I promised we'd film everything and build a YouTube channel — before-and-afters, training videos, the works. We never did. We tried a group chat, posted a few pictures, and it never stuck. And I carried guilt about that for years, because the shops that inspired us — the ones my whole team can name, the ones we watch and quote — all document everything. Some people in this world have practically turned making videos into a rule. Here's what I finally understood: that's a *marketing* choice, not a lean requirement. Showing your work to your own team, on the TV in the morning meeting, before-and-afters where the people who need to see them see them — that part matters and we did do it. Broadcasting it to strangers is optional. Don't measure your shop by anyone else's standard — not Paul's, not mine. Build the place *your* team wants to come to. The kind of place where people hang around after hours, where you throw a barbecue on a random Thursday just because. Great by your team's standards. That's the only scoreboard that counts.

Get out of the way sooner. My whole story is that I waited too long to hand things off — the meeting, the ideas, the improvements. Your instinct will be to hold on

because you can see it clearer than anyone. Fight that instinct. Your job is to start it and then get out of the way.

Stop pushing, and let them pull. This is the biggest one, and it took me years to feel it. As long as I was pushing lean *onto* my team, it was fragile — it only moved when I pushed. The moment I opened up and let them carry it, it became self-sustaining. They onboard the new folks. They help each other prep. They bring the ideas, and my job shrinks to figuring out how to shut up and guide. If you know anything about kanban, you'll recognize this exactly: kanban works because you stop *pushing* inventory to a forecast and let the floor *pull* what it actually needs. Turns out the same law runs your people. Pull beats push — on the shelf and in the room.

(That inventory piece, by the way — the pushing-and-pulling of parts, the running-out, the over-ordering — became its own obsession for us, and eventually its own system and its own book. But that's a different guide. This one's about starting.)

AS LONG AS YOU'RE MOVING

People think lean is about efficiency. Stopwatches, waste, thirty-minutes-down-to-seven. And it is — that part's real, and it'll save your business real money.

But that's the byproduct. After a few years in, here's what I actually believe it is: **lean is the community and the team and the support you build.** The whole shop around the table, facing each other, flattening the screw packs so one person doesn't have to. A skeptic becoming a champion. A quiet guy who never spoke up now hosting a meeting everybody looks forward to. The efficiency is what you get. The team is what you *build*, and the efficiency is just the excuse to build it.

Which brings the whole thing full circle. You start terrified of your people — the skeptics, the eye-rollers, the one who's cancer, the crew that thinks it's just another thing the boss is trying. And if you stick with it, you end up here, describing the whole endeavor as something closer to love for your team. The people problem you were most afraid of was never going to be solved by a system. It gets solved by becoming the kind of shop that shows up for each other.

You don't have to do it perfectly. You just have to start, and keep going. So here's the only standard I'll leave you with, the one that lets you off every hook except the one that matters:

As long as you're moving forward, as long as you're getting better, as long as you're doing it together — that's what matters.

Everything can always be improved. Go find the first thing that bugs you, and fix it.

The field guide I followed: Paul Akers, 2 Second Lean — he gives it away free, and it's the best on-ramp there is. The shops that lit the spark for us, and still do: Ryan Tierney at Seating Matters, the one that mirrored us — same laser, same press brake, same welding, so my team saw their own jobs done better; Jack Busey at JJB Lean, the one that gave us hope — a welding shop that went from total mess to an unbelievable transformation; and Brian Myers at Lean by Doing, the one that shows the ceiling — a machine of a shop, almost impossible to keep up with, and proof of how far this goes. Also FastCap, Yellotools, and the whole community of makers whose tours we watch on repeat. Find your own — the one that mirrors you, the one that gives you hope, the one that shows you the summit. Take from them like we did, and when you've built something worth showing, maybe it'll be your turn.