It is never too late to learn to remove muda
The staff of Hotel Taj Mahal Palace learnt lessons from Masai Imai

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Muda is Japanese word which means futility, uselessness, wastefulness, and it is a key concept of lean thinking. Lean Thinking is a business method based on the history of Japanese manufacturing techniques which have been applied worldwide within many types of industries. It is ultimately a mind-set – a way of viewing the world that aims at handling work in a Lean manner. Lean puts focus on providing high levels of customer value by continuously improving business processes while eliminating wastage.

Lean takes its roots from the Toyota Production System. This Japanese company was able to create a sustainable ecosystem for work, where they are able to minimize their costs, ensure efficiency in their processes, and sell their products at a competitive price. In fact, when Toyota entered the U.S car market,

they were able to sell their cars at a much lower price than U.S manufacturers. The Toyota Production System (TPS) consists of the three types of unconventional allocation of resources: Muda, Mura and Muri.

Mura means unevenness, non-uniformity, and irregularity. Mura is the reason for the existence of any of the seven wastes; defects and mistakes, waiting or delay, transportation, motions, over production, inventory, over processing and human potential.

Mura drives and leads to Muda. For example, in a manufacturing line, products need to pass through several workstations during the assembly process. When the capacity of one station is greater than the other stations, you will see an accumulation of raw material, overproduction, waiting, etc. The goal of a Lean production system is to level out the workload so that unevenness or waste accumulation is eliminated.

Muri means overburden, in organizations some people are overburdened while some escape work. It also means excessiveness, impossible or unreasonableness tasks, wrong deadlines. Muri can result from Mura and in some cases be caused by excessive removal of Muda (waste) from the process. Muri exists when machines or operators are utilized for more than 100% capability to complete a task or in an unsustainable way. Muri exists due to employee absenteeism, illness, unavailability of raw material and breakdowns of machines. Standardization of work can help avoid Muri by designing the work processes to evenly distribute the workload and not overburden any particular employee, machine, workstation or equipment.

I give here below a short instance to explain how Taj Mahal Palace Hotel in Mumbai had to learn removing muda from their system.

The Taj hotel group had invited Mr. Masai Imai from Japan to hold a workshop for its staff. The staff members were very sceptical about what they would learn from him as the hotel is doing excellent business. Masai from Japan had no exposure to hotel industry. What could he teach them? Everybody as planned gathered for the workshop in the conference hall sharp at 9 am. Mr. Masai was introduced to them; his personality could hardly impress them. He couldn't speak great English either. He was formulating each sentence in Japanese and then translating it into rather awkward English. "Good morning! Let's start work. I am told this is a workshop; but I see neither work nor shop. So let's proceed where work is happening. Let's start with the first room on the first floor." Mr. Masai was followed by the senior management, the participants; the video camera crew trouped out of the conference room and proceeded to the destination. It was a room on the first floor which happened to be the laundry room of the hotel. Mr. Masai entered the room and stood at the window, "beautiful view!" he said. The room had panorama view of the Arabian Sea. The staff knew it; they didn't need a Japanese consultant to tell them this! "A room with such a beautiful view is being wasted as a laundry room. Shift the laundry to the basement and convert this into a guest room."

Oh God! Nobody had ever thought about that! The manager said, "Yes, it can be done." "Then let's do it.", Mr. Masai said. The manager said he would make a note of it in the report and do the needful later. But, Masai insisted on doing it immediately, he told the manager to immediately decide which room in basement should be converted in a laundry. By lunch time the first floor room was converted into a guest room it was ready for customer to move in. Mr Masai asked the staff why the hotel loses few thousands per day of beautiful view room.

So he pointed Mura – short-sightedness wasting a room with beautiful view to laundry, loosing of thousands of rupees per day on the room, delay in decision making, motion etc.

The next destination was the pantry. The group entered. At the entrance were two huge sinks full of plates to be washed. Mr. Masai removed his jacket and started washing the plates. "Sir, Please, what are you doing?" the manager didn't know what to say and what to do. "Why, I am washing the plates" said Mr. Masai. He continued washing, "I think sink is for washing plates, there are stands here to keep the plates and the plates should go into the stands." All the officials wondered - did they require a consultant to tell them that? After finishing the job, Mr. Masai asked, "how many plates do you have?' The manager answered "Plenty, so that there should never be any shortage." Mr. Masai said, one lesson to be learned in this workshop is to avoid muda. If you have plenty of plates, there will be delay in cleaning them up. The first step to correct this situation is to remove all the excess plates. The manager told that he would report this also. Masai told him that reporting writing is also wasting time, instead he advised to pack the extra plates in a box immediately and send them in storage. Masai told the staff that the particular workshop was to find hidden 'muda' The staff eagerly waited to find out other mudas and to learn how to avoid it.

This incident pointed out muri which means overburden. The sink was full of unwashed plates. The process of washing plates was delayed unnecessarily; over and above the hotel stored additional plates overburdening the inventory.

On the last day, Mr. Masai told a story of Japanese and an American, both fond of hunting, entered a jungle with guns. In the pursuit of game they entered deep jungle and suddenly realized that they had run out of bullets. Just then they heard a lion roaring. Both started running. But the Japanese took a short break to put on his sports shoes. The American said, "What are you doing? We must first get to the car." The Japanese said, "No. I only have to ensure that I remain ahead of you." All the participants were engrossed in listening to the story; they realized suddenly that the lion would stop after getting his victim! The lesson is competition in today's world is so fierce, that it is important to stay ahead of others even by just a couple of steps. Mr. Masai said further that India is such a huge and naturally well-endowed country, we need to remove the numerous mudas in our system.

KEYWORDS: Muda, Mura, Muri, Japanese, Lean Thinking, Toyota Production System, Masai Imai, Taj Mahal Palace Hotel, Zero Waste.