

THE LEAN LEADER'S FIELD GUIDE

Four Behaviors that Drive Transformation

A practical starter guide from the Lean Enterprise Institute



The 80/20 Reality

Research shows that implementing lean tools represents only 20% of transformation effort. The other 80% involves changing how leaders think and act.

Most transformations stall not because of technical problems, but because leadership behaviors haven't changed.



This guide introduces four core behaviors needed for a lean transformation:

Go See

Understanding the work
where value is created

Ask Why

Developing problem solvers
through coaching

Show Respect

Creating safe work environments
that allow problems to surface

Connect to Strategy

Linking daily work to objectives

Use this guide to assess where you are, choose one behavior to develop, and get started this week.

[Start digital leadership assessment »](#)

Behavior 1: Go See

Why It Matters

You can't lead work you don't understand. Reports tell you what happened last week. The gemba shows you what's happening now and why.

The 30-Minute Gemba Walk

1**Before (5 min)**

- Choose focus: Observe, coach, or support?
- Prepare mindset: Understand, not inspect.
- Bring a notebook, open-ended questions, and curiosity.

2**During (20 min)****Phase 1: Observe (8 min)**

- Watch work happen before asking questions
- Notice flow, variation, workarounds, frustration points.
- Look at visual management: Current? Used? Helpful?

Phase 2: Engage (10 min)

- "Walk me through what happens here."
- "What makes this work difficult?"
- "If you could change one thing, what would it be?"

Phase 3: Support (2 min)

- "What help do you need?"
- Connect frontline work to purpose.
- Thank frontline associates for their time.

3**After (5 min)**

- Follow through on commitments within 24 hours.
- Document patterns you see, not individual problems.
- Schedule next visit.

Behavior 1: Go See

This Week's Practice

- ☐ Schedule one 30-minute gemba visit.
- ☐ Observe for eight minutes before asking questions.
- ☐ Ask only "What?" and "How?" (not "Why?" yet).
- ☐ Follow through on one commitment you make.

What you'll notice: You'll learn something reports never showed you.

Behavior 2: Ask Why

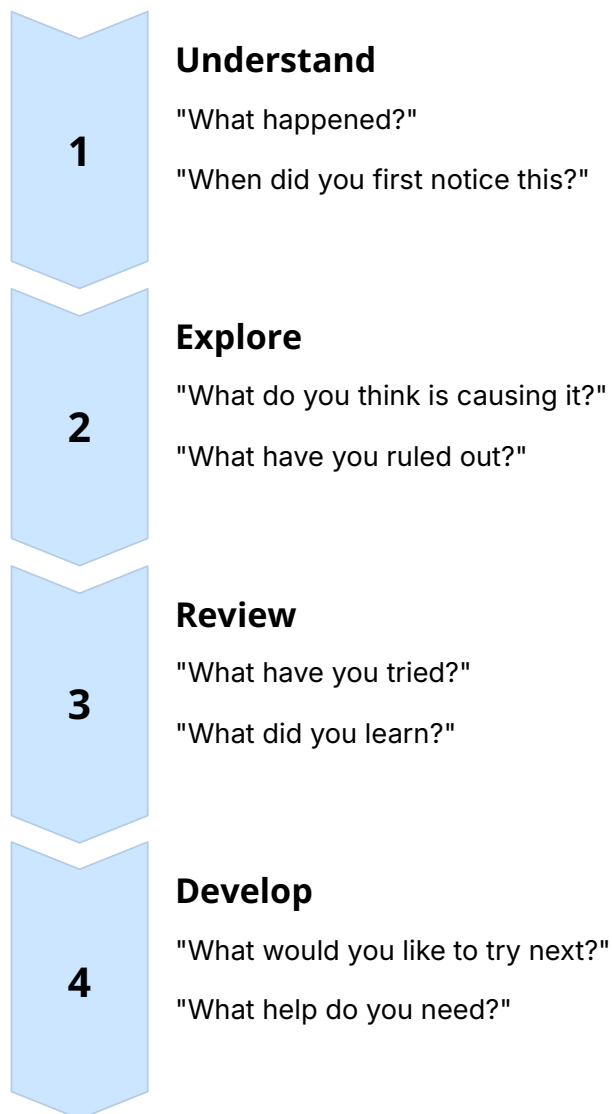
Why It Matters

Providing answers creates dependency. Asking questions develops capability.

One problem solver (you) vs. 20 problem solvers (your team).

The Question Progression

When someone brings you a problem, use this sequence:



Behavior 2: Ask Why

The Hard Part

When individuals ask, "What should I do?"

✗ **Don't give them the answer.**

✓ **Do ask, "What have you considered?"**

Then wait (five seconds of silence). Let them think.

Warning Signs You're Solving, Not Coaching

- You're talking more than 50% of the time.
- You're providing the answer.
- They're writing down your solution.
- The conversation ends with your action items.

This Week's Practice

- ☐ In three conversations, ask five questions before offering any solution.
- ☐ When tempted to answer, ask "What do you think?"
- ☐ Count questions vs. statements in each conversation.
- ☐ Wait five seconds after asking a question.

What you'll notice: Your team's thinking gets deeper. Your solutions aren't always better.

Behavior 3: Show Respect

Why It Matters

Hidden problems become crises. Early problems are easier to solve. People hide problems when they fear blame, not when they trust support.

How to Build Psychological Safety

Your first response sets the tone.

When someone surfaces a problem:

✗ Don't say:

- "Why didn't you catch this earlier?"
- "This is unacceptable."
- "Whose fault is this?"

✓ Do say:

- "Thank you for telling me."
- "Help me understand what happened."
- "What can we learn from this?"

The Thank You Rule

Thank people for:

- Surfacing problems early
- Admitting mistakes
- Challenging your ideas (respectfully)
- Asking for help
- Trying something new (even if it didn't work)

Behavior 3: Show Respect

The Follow-Through Rule

Track commitments you make:

- Barriers people identify
- Help you promise
- Issues raised

Close the loop within one week:

- "You mentioned X. Here's what I learned."
- "I looked into that issue — here's what we can do."
- When you can't help, explain why transparently.

This Week's Practice

- ☐ Thank one person each day for surfacing a problem.
- ☐ Share one of your own mistakes and what you learned.
- ☐ Follow through on three commitments from last week.
- ☐ Notice your first reaction to bad news — pause before responding.

What you'll notice: People start bringing you information earlier.

Behavior 4: Connect to Strategy

Why It Matters

When people understand why their work matters, they make better decisions. When strategy feels disconnected from daily work, people just go through motions.

The Simple Connection

Every team should know:

1 Top three objectives of the organization	2 The objective(s) the work supports
3 How contributions are measured	4 The top three improvement priorities

If you don't know these, neither will your team.

Make It Visible

At daily huddles:

- "We track [this metric] because it connects to [this objective]."
- "This problem affects our ability to achieve [this goal]."
- "This improvement moved us closer to [this target]."

On your visual management board:

Strategic Objective: [Clear statement]

Our Target: [Specific metric]

Current: [Where we are]

Gap: [What's left to close]

Related Improvements:

- Project A (Owner)
- Project B (Owner)

Behavior 4: Connect to Strategy

The Monthly Strategy Check

30 minutes with your team:

1. Review objectives (5 min).
2. Review progress toward targets (10 min). What's working? What's not?
3. Review improvement work status (10 min).
4. What needs to change? (5 min).

This Week's Practice

- ☐ Write down your area's top three objectives.
- ☐ At the daily huddle, connect one metric to a strategic objective.
- ☐ Ask three team members: "What are we trying to achieve?"
- ☐ Add a strategic objective to your visual board.

What you'll notice: People start talking about impact, not just activity.

Your 30-Day Quick Start



Week 1: Choose and Start

Pick one behavior from your lowest score.

- Schedule three practice sessions this week.
- Use the frameworks in this guide.
- Document what happened and what you learned.



Week 2: Build Consistency

- Exhibit the same behavior (use five practice sessions).
- Notice what's working and what's not.
- Adjust your approach based on results.



Week 3: Refine

- Exhibit the same behavior (use five more practice sessions).
- Teach the framework to another leader.
- Document patterns you're seeing.



Week 4: Make It Systematic

- Block recurring time for this practice.
- Create a simple tracking system.
- Share results with your team or peer leaders.

End of 30 Days:

- ☐ Retake the assessment for your focus behavior.
- ☐ Celebrate progress.
- ☐ Choose: Continue this behavior or add a second behavior.

Common Challenges

1**"I don't have time for this."****Start here:** 30 minutes per week = 1% of work time.

Replace one status meeting with a gemba walk or coaching conversation.

2**"People don't tell me about problems."****Reality:** Your past reactions taught them not to point out problems.**Solution:** Say "Thank you for telling me" to the next three problems people bring, even if the news is bad. Follow through on one thing you commit to.**3****"They just want me to tell them what to do."****Reality:** You trained them to expect that.**Solution:** Tell them you're changing your approach. "I'm going to help you think this through instead of just giving the answer." Then be consistent.**4****"This feels slower than just solving it myself."****Short term:** Yes.**Long term:** Problems are solved faster with 20 problem solvers than with only one problem solver (you).

Track the time you spend on recurring problems this month. That's the cost of not developing capability.

What's Next?

This guide gets you started. But sustainable transformation requires:



Systematic leadership development

Across your entire team, not just you practicing alone.



Integrated management systems

That connect strategy (hoshin kanri), daily work (daily management), and problem solving (A3 thinking).



Expert coaching

To see what you can't see yourself and push your thinking deeper.



Peer learning

With others facing similar challenges so you don't solve the same problems twice.



Deep Dive

Turn insight into capability— and capability into enterprise results.

You've taken the first step, build on that momentum with learning experiences that move you from individual understanding to organization-wide transformation.

Lean Management Program

A 5-month, team-based experience that integrates **strategy development and execution**, daily management, and problem-solving into one coherent system. Gain the skills, coaching, and frameworks to align your organization from the boardroom to the frontline.

[LEARN MORE AT LEAN.ORG/LMP](https://lean.org/lmp)

The Lean Summit

Connect with lean leaders solving real problems at scale. Experience keynotes, workshops, and breakthrough strategies that move organizations from insight to impact.

[LEARN MORE AT LEAN.ORG/SUMMIT](https://lean.org/summit)

Lean Leadership Learning Tour

Step inside organizations that have made Lean management a way of working. See how leaders at every level connect purpose, process, and people—then bring those ideas back to your own workplace.

[LEARN MORE AT LEAN.ORG/TOUR](https://lean.org/tour)

Training and Consulting for Organizations

When you're ready to apply and scale these practices in your own context, our experienced coaches work alongside your leadership and frontline teams to design, test, and sustain the Lean management system.

[TALK TO A COACH AND LEARN MORE AT LEAN.ORG/CLP](https://lean.org/clp)



About The Lean Enterprise Institute

The Lean Enterprise Institute (LEI) is a nonprofit research, education, publishing, and conferencing organization founded in 1997 by management expert James P. Womack, PhD. Our mission is to advance lean thinking and practice in ways that enable people—at every level of an organization—to solve real problems and create more value for customers, employees, and owners. As a founding member of the Lean Global Network, LEI works with like-minded organizations around the world to share knowledge and accelerate learning.

Learn, Apply, Transform

At LEI, we believe lean is best learned by doing—and best applied by building capability through real problem solving. That's why our offerings span the full journey from individual learning to enterprise transformation. Whether you're just discovering lean or leading an organizational shift, we provide access to timely insights, trusted resources, and hands-on support through every phase:

Books and Learning Materials

Our books, guides, and digital resources provide plain-language explanations of lean concepts with real-world examples. They help individuals build foundational knowledge and begin practicing lean thinking right away.

Courses and Webinars

LEI faculty are experienced practitioners who teach using real cases, tools, and methods. We help you move from learning about lean to actually doing it—while adapting to your unique context.

Summits and Learning Events

Our flagship Lean Summit brings together top thinkers and doers in lean management. Additional learning tours, workshops, and events provide inspiration, new perspectives, and opportunities to explore industry-specific applications.

Coaching and Capability Development

For organizations ready to apply lean more deeply, LEI works side-by-side with internal teams to build capability through solving meaningful problems. From improving daily operations to innovating through LPPD and aligning direction through hoshin kanri, we support you in co-leading lasting change.

Transformation and Scaling Support

Our goal is to help companies sustain higher performance, spread lean thinking across the enterprise, and ultimately take full ownership of their transformation. We provide guidance in developing management systems that foster continuous improvement and adaptive leadership at every level.

GET STARTED BY VISITING [LEAN.ORG](https://lean.org)