

GSB case study wins top award at Emerald AABS

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A case study on the successful turnaround at K-Way won top honours at the annual Emerald/Association of African Business Schools (AABS) Case Study Competition.

The results of the competition, which aims to encourage and promote the development of high-quality teaching case material from real-life situations in Africa, were announced in May. This marks the GSB's third consecutive win in this competition.

The study details the journey undertaken by K-Way as they adopted lean thinking principles. It also looked at the new management challenges they face 12 years on, particularly in sustaining lean thinking. "The case study can be used to teach students how they might address the individual (but not necessarily dissimilar) challenges companies face in entrenching lean thinking in their organisations", says Fatima Hamdulay, senior lecturer at the UCT GSB, who supervised the project. K-Way is one of South Africa's best known manufacturers of outdoor gear.

The case study, entitled "The Evolution of Lean Thinking at K-Way – Where to Next?" was conducted by Hamdulay's student Himanshu Vidhani, as part of his MBA thesis. It will be published in a forthcoming release of Emerald's Emerging Sources Case Collection.

"They took a business on the brink of extinction and turned it into a business that came to define the trends for technical clothing in South Africa. The study traced K-Way's journey for over a decade.

"This company was on the verge of closure 12 years ago," explains Hamdulay. "But with the application of core lean principles - eliminating waste, creating greater respect for people and continuously engaging in how to do both these things better – they were able to turn things around, one KPI at a time. And importantly, right now, they acknowledge that it feels as if they are just getting started."

Lean is an approach based on the Toyota Production System and the Toyota Way, employed by the hugely successful Japanese company to set a new benchmark in car manufacturing in the 1980s. It represents a way of thinking and being for all members of a company or organisation and has been successfully deployed in companies across the world, in industries as diverse as healthcare, government and financial services.

"The core of lean leadership is the necessity of adopting a different way of behaving. It is both a leadership and a management system. This involves learning new behaviours and tools; like learning from mistakes instead of knee-jerk disciplining of those who are seen to be making them," says Emeritus Professor Norman Faull, Director and Founder of the Lean Institute Africa.

"The most significant take-away from the case is that companies need to change their mindset and focus on the work that needs to happen and in particular, the people doing it. It is a combination of simultaneously empowering people and improving processes that makes any organisation successful," says Vidhani.

It's important to remember, however, that the Lean Thinking approach is not a "cookie cutter" method, adds Hamdulay. A case study delivers lessons, but each organisation will have a unique situation which will demand unique redress, or countermeasures. "You have to really understand your situation and apply the philosophy as well as the appropriate tools that go along with it, and test your understanding of the situation all the time," she says.

The win came as a very pleasant surprise, says Hamdulay. Vidhani believes the case of K-way is powerful enough that it

was worth believing in. “I was ecstatic, I wasn’t expecting to win the competition,” he says. “My supervisor, from the beginning, believed in this case and pushed me to write a case study that was fit for use in the classroom.” Hamdulay adds, “If it can withstand the classroom test, and the story is compelling to key issues of management practice, it is on a good footing.”

Both Vidhani and Hamdulay believe there is room for a great deal more research in the field of sustained lean thinking, especially in South Africa and particularly where the practical meets the theoretical. “In the South African context, there is a need for more research on bridging the gap between lean tools and lean thinking,” says Vidhani.

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