

# Lesla Nichols

---

## **A Picture Really is Worth a Thousand Words:**

### Becoming a Visual Leader

After lunch on my first day of work at Toyota, I was tested with a simple question: “Lesla, could you join us? We’re in a training session and we’d like your help.”

The room was dark, illuminated only by a projector. A tall fellow stood in front of a group of colleagues I had yet to meet. He continued with his presentation about how the image on the screen represented Toyota’s well-known practice of *kaizen*, or continuous improvement.

My seat wasn’t warm before I got a question from my new boss, the General Manager of the Toyota division. He wanted to know if I could share my thoughts on the presentation. In particular, how this scratchy, hand-drawn image illustrated the concept of Kaizen to me. Suddenly my seat felt very warm.

“Um, I don’t really know much about Kaizen yet and. . .” I finished the sentence in my head. Why damage relations with colleagues I haven’t yet met by criticizing someone’s grade school-level drawing skills?

But my boss wasn’t going to let me off the hook, “We know you don’t know much about Kaizen. But that’s why you’re here. That’s why we’re all here. But I know you have fresh eyes and a willingness to help the team. We are all struggling together here.” I saw a few heads nod in the dark, so I dove in with all I had.

“Actually, the image looks like a plant to me, or fruit of some kind. Maybe a lemon, because it looks like it has several seeds in the middle. Are those . . . the seeds of Kaizen that you want to sow?” I decided to stop there.

The presenter looked at me and just said, "No." But then he added, "But, they could be. I hadn't looked at that way before. Thanks." He reached over and shook my hand. *Whew!*

My boss declared an end to the learning session by congratulating the presenter for his presentation, then leaving the room.

I didn't fully realize it at the time, but I had just been introduced to one of the most elemental features of Toyota's breakthrough operations management system—tagged with many names, among them the Toyota Production System, The Toyota Way, Lean Manufacturing, and others. I had discovered that Kaizen isn't achievable without showing others what you see. With this starting point, others can contribute, giving the organization the best ideas from each of us.

This was new for me. When I walked into Toyota, it was with a career behind me that had been built on words. I had been a communications professional, creating ideas and concepts through the use of words. I loved good diction and I would collect useful quotations for inspiration and motivation. But now I have to admit that words can also confuse; the different ways we use and understand language means that no matter how hard we try, there will never be perfect clarity when we communicate in words.

In any group achievement effort, clarity about the current condition and a course of action are mandatory. I have found that visualization eliminates confusion, ensures clarity, and therefore establishes a shared sense of urgency.

### *Visualizing the Invisible for Kaizen Success*

As my career with Toyota progressed, I had countless experiences with Kaizen. Some were more fruitful than others, but all succeeded in helping me learn by doing, and specifically by doing the real, unglamorous work of attacking critical business issues. I have one story in particular.

"I can't see it," the boss announced to the team.

Ten of us had gathered from across North America to share the results of a 3-month intensive quality improvement project we'd been working on in one of our high-tech manufacturing plants. We had just shared the results of our efforts.

*Anything but that comment*, I thought. A lot of people had invested many hours of human power—body and brain—to make an impressive reduction in the passing of a defect from one process to the next. Surely the difference could not be “invisible.”

In my world at Toyota, this didn’t mean outright rejection, but it meant that we had some serious improvements ahead.

“So, what’s the deal? Was it really that bad?” I asked.

“Of course not,” he said, “but you know that for Kaizen to be achieved, it is critical for people to be able to see the importance of what they have done and for others to want to be involved in the future. The others on the team need to know that it isn’t enough to make the improvement itself. Without connecting the hands-on work to a clear business need people feel, this work won’t have meaning beyond this team.”

“Okay,” I said, “but it is like we have to do two almost-impossible things. First, we have to make a good match of the improvement strategy to the skill of the team. Second, we have to develop their capability to tell a visual story of what we did, of things that are virtually invisible.”

He smiled at me and said, “Yes, it is exactly like that.”

As we worked through the details of what was missing, it became apparent that while our plan was sound, we had not successfully visualized our work. Why was that? I was still struggling with the fact that making a good visual story of improvement work is not something most people want or know how to do.

“And why is *that*?” the boss inquired.

“Fear, I think. We don’t have a lot of experience visualizing as opposed to verbalizing what we are thinking and deciding. So, there is a fear of looking stupid in front of others. To top it off, we all think we have to be some kind of artist to show our visualization.” He agreed, and so we moved forward discussing what skills are needed, how to develop them and the hardest part—how to overcome natural reluctance and how to convince people to see the benefits of visualizing their work.

## *Why We Visualize*

Years later, as I continue my quest of how to develop these skills in myself and others, the jury has reached a verdict on the power of visualizing. As I work with organizations willing to pursue this, I see its merits over and over:

- Drawing to illustrate thinking, which leads a team to faster results;
- Makes prioritizing decisions clearer and more efficient;
- Transforms frustration into curiosity as trends and patterns of problems are illuminated;
- Creates a spirit of sharing from area to area as people see how others have dealt with similar situations.

## **Lessons on Learning to Visualize**

I am mostly over my shyness of my decidedly humble drawing skills, because the drawing skill itself isn't the issue. It is about being willing to share your ideas, often before they feel ready for others to know.

This is critical because the question is not about the comfort level of any individual. It is about an organization, a team, allowing the creativity and expertise of its people to be shared accurately and to maximum effect.

Creating a visual environment is an invitation for every person to contribute their uniqueness. A team leader who used to work closely with me recently shared the view that "if you treat a person like they can make a difference, they will."

As one of my favorite mentors prepared to return to Japan after a 4-year assignment as manufacturing head in North America, I asked him to share his impression of the weak points of our Kaizen in North America.

He shook his head and smiled. He quietly told me, "You know, it is really so easy but we make it so tough. If only we would do a great job with the images on the Kaizen flip charts." He laughed when he saw my eyebrows shoot to the ceiling. "Yes, it is true," he said. "In Kaizen, we need to be very clear about who is doing what, how that will happen, where we are making improvements, and how much resource is needed. These

very basic things must be crystal clear in our daily jobs as well, visual to everyone in the worksite, so we must follow up like a dog with a bone. Of course, you know, the dog will never give up. That's it. Really."

### **Becoming Visual Leaders**

I hear echoes of him in almost all the places I work as frustrated CEOs talk about the lack of accountability, follow-up, and "communication up the chain." In most of these situations, I find common issues:

- Critical business objectives without focus or clear progress,
- Executive staff meetings that end before decisions are made or follow-up assigned,
- Leadership goals and targets passed down to the next level, without "re-sizing" to an appropriate span of control.

During a recent visit with a client, I found them struggling following a management change. The good news—the organization was hungry to help with any changes needed. The bad news—new management was not making change clear. All layers of the company struggled to find the contribution needed from them. Communication came from different leaders with the common problem of being too vague for people to connect with. Kaizen was needed—in this case, Leadership Kaizen. Within one day, a small team renovated the executive meeting room to create a space that visually presented the needs and direction of the organization. In this one room, it became easy for everyone to see:

- The critical priorities for the company, including key performance metrics,
- Five key strategies to pull the organization forward, each with a clear owner,
- A template showing the plan verses actual condition, barriers to achieving the plan and support needed,
- Expectations from the CEO of how management methods would evolve from a verbally focus team to a team of visual leaders.

**And so, today, one of my fundamental teachings with clients seeking operational improvements is to "Visualize the Invisible."**

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

# Lesla Nichols



Lesla Nichols has spent over two decades guiding organizations toward improved competitive strength by applying the principles of the Toyota Production System (TPS). To accomplish this, she creates an army of problem solvers among the organizations' employees and managers. Her work focuses on system and process improvement to create a close connection between each employee and the customer.

As a key leader within Toyota's North American Operations and TPS centers, Nichols led teams who analyzed and solved the toughest operation-

al problems within Toyota and its supply base.

Nichols' career has a variety of positions including Toyota production manager, communications firm consultant, research assistant to U.S. Senator Wendell Ford and campaign press secretary to a former Governor. Prior to opening her own consultancy, Nichols was with the Greater Boston Manufacturing Partnership.

She is a partner with Rasmussen Consulting, serves on the board of a prominent US manufacturing company, and writes extensively for online media.