

Making an In-House Lean Lead Succeed

A proposed working architecture

If your direction is to bring on a full-time internal lean lead, our recommendation is to settle the working architecture between that hire and us before they start — not after. A decade of work with clients in this configuration has taught us that the question is not whether to engage an experienced outside practitioner alongside the new hire, but how. The patterns that hurt clients in this situation are structural, not personal, and they can be designed out in advance.

The pattern we have watched repeatedly: a midsized company hires an internal lean lead after a strong run of events with outside support. Within a year the new hire — understandably protective of the role — works to reduce or end the outside engagement, viewing it as competition. The pace of meaningful improvement slows. Senior leadership rooms become harder to command from a junior hierarchical position. Difficult findings get softened to preserve internal relationships. Lean stops producing visible wins, and the program loses its champion at the next budget cycle. The damage is not the new hire's fault; it is the predictable output of an unstructured arrangement.

The architecture we propose has three components.

First, we position our engagement as mentorship rather than parallel practice. The discipline's own ladder makes the relationship clear: a Green Belt can participate in a kaizen event, a Black Belt can run one, and the tier above coordinates multiple Black Belts running parallel events for system-wide improvement. We teach and certify Black Belts through the University of Nevada, Reno, and operate at that orchestration tier. The internal lead's career upside is tied to our continued involvement, not threatened by it: we mentor them from Green Belt through Black Belt under that credentialed structure, give them the byline for improvements we develop together, and stand above their work rather than alongside it. Their progression is our success metric, and theirs.

Second, we scope our work around what an internal hire structurally cannot do alone — leading the room when senior subject-matter experts need to be brought along, delivering candid findings to leadership without internal political cost, importing solutions across industries and maturity levels we encounter at other clients, and supporting multi-divisional work where one person cannot be in two places. The internal lead handles continuity, day-to-day stabilization, and the relationships that only an embedded person can build.

Third, we propose a defined cadence — quarterly on-site engagement plus standing phone access for the internal lead between visits — so the relationship has rhythm and does not quietly atrophy into “call us if you need us,” which we have learned is the path of death for these arrangements.

We would value the chance to discuss this architecture with leadership before the new hire is in place. After they start, the dynamics we are trying to head off become much harder to redesign.