

Sustaining Lean Over the Long Run

A note on choosing the right structure

The decision in front of you is often framed as “fractional consultant versus full-time hire.” We would suggest framing it one level higher: what structure most reliably sustains lean gains five and ten years out? That question changes the conversation.

In Eliyahu Goldratt’s *The Goal* — still the most widely read novel on operations improvement — the consultant Jonah appears infrequently, asks a few disciplined questions, and leaves. The factory manager and his team own the insights. Goldratt was making a structural point: the catalyst function is more durable than the resident expert, because the insights belong to the people who will live with the process. The cadence Jonah models is the cadence we have come to advocate after a decade of practice.

Concretely, that means one well-targeted kaizen event roughly every six weeks at the system bottleneck. Back-to-back events fatigue the whole organization because systems thinking engages the entire value stream each time. Parallel events only work where divisions are genuinely independent and large — roughly \$30M and up — and even then the discipline is bottleneck targeting. Working off the bottleneck reduces idle time and stokes job-security anxiety without improving throughput.

What an experienced outside practitioner brings to that cadence is harder to replicate inside one company than it first appears. Between engagements we carry your problem into every other client, and their solved problems back to you — across industries and across maturity levels. We arrive without a position in your hierarchy, which is what lets us teach a room of confident senior experts and tell leadership what we are actually seeing. The discipline’s own ladder is worth being explicit about: a Green Belt can participate in a kaizen event, a Black Belt can run one, and the practitioner who coordinates several Black Belts running parallel events for system-wide improvement sits a tier above. We teach and certify Black Belts through the University of Nevada, Reno, which by the discipline’s own logic places us at that orchestration tier. A midsized company’s prevailing salary band typically buys a Green Belt or, on a strong day, a Black Belt — capable of participating in or running an event, but neither equipped nor positioned to orchestrate parallel events across the system.

For clients who want a continuing lean program rather than event-by-event work, we propose a fractional lean officer engagement: a roughly \$50K annual retainer, with discounted kaizen events and discounted UNR Green Belt certifications layered on top. The retainer buys oversight of up to ten in-flight lean projects, weekly office hours for ten project champions, and standing access between events. This is precisely the function the in-house hire is being recruited to perform, delivered at the orchestration tier the in-house hire structurally cannot reach. For clients not yet ready for that commitment, disciplined event work remains available pay-per-event without the retainer.

On cost, the retainer plus a typical year of discounted events sits below the fully loaded cost of a mid-level internal lean hire in most US markets, while delivering a senior practitioner instead of a junior one. The pay-per-event option — eight events a year at \$15K each plus roughly 20% for expenses — is lower still. More importantly, a clean external engagement produces a clean causal signal for ROI: the intervention is bounded in time and scope, so the lift attaches to it visibly. That makes lean defensible at budget time, which is when many in-house lean programs quietly die.

We would welcome the conversation about which engagement structure fits your operation.