

How to Conduct a Lean Coffee

Introduction

Lean Coffees were created by Jim Benson and Jeremy Lightsmith. The approach is a melding of Open Space Technology¹ (OST) and Personal Kanban (PK). OST is a process for having a group democratically develop an agenda for conversations and then manage that agenda. PK was developed by Jim Benson. Kanban is used to visually manage the conversation. The “coffee” portion was inspired by Open Coffee, a group that started in Silicon Valley to support aspiring entrepreneurs to connect with investors.

One of the great reasons to use a Lean Coffee is to learn and support each other in Lean endeavors. Mixed groups and company groups meet weekly for one-hour (or longer) Lean Coffees to get help, test ideas and share progress of adopting a Lean strategy.

Don't limit the use of Lean Coffee to Lean. We know of one software company that uses a Lean Coffee for their weekly sales meeting. We also know of an architectural engineering firm that is using Lean Coffees to explore the issues of the business. One project team for a hospital renovation and addition uses a Lean Coffee to give more people a voice in the project.

In all cases, Lean Coffee is a “free space” for people to get to explore issues and concerns that they otherwise don't get to discuss. This free space gives people a chance to try out behaviors, exercise leadership, get help, give help and grow professionally.

The Lean Coffee Process

Create name tags.

Set-up a Personal Kanban with the process steps: “Ready”, “Discussing” and “Complete”. Use sticky notes on the table top.

Do a quick (2-minute) check-in to see how everyone is doing and for introductions.

Have participants propose discussion topics, one topic per sticky note. Each proposer takes 15 to 30 seconds to pitch their topic to the group. Once all topics have been pitched, voting begins to establish a priority for discussing the topics. Each person gets two votes. They vote by making tally marks on the sticky. They are allowed to vote for their own topic. They are also allowed to place both tally marks on one topic.

Order the discussion topics from highest to lowest votes in the “Ready” column of the PK.

Agree to the time box for discussing. 8 minutes is a good starting point. Try 4-minute follow-up sessions when the group decides to continue the conversation. Use a timer to track the time.

When ready for discussing, the proposer for the topic moves the sticky from the Ready column

¹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Open-space_technology

to the Discussing column. The proposer starts the conversation. The point is to have a conversation. People are free to jump in with questions and comments. The conversation continues until the timer runs out.

When time runs out, use *Roman voting* – thumbs up, thumbs down and thumbs sideways (indifferent) – to decide to continue with the conversation for another time box or to move on. If you continue, reset the clock for ½ the starting time box. Continue this process as long as the thumbs up exceed the thumbs down.

When the topic has ended, the proposer moves the sticky to the Complete column. The proposer for the next topic in line starts the process over by moving their sticky from the Ready column to the Discussing column.

Continue the process as described above.

5 minutes before the end of the available time for the Lean Coffee conduct a quick retrospective on how much value was produced in the conversation. Different groups use different approaches. Some use a “fist-of-five” to designate with a show of fingers from zero to 5 displayed how much value they got in the session. 5 fingers means “I couldn't have spent this time any better.” No fingers means “Why am I still sitting here? It was a total waste.” On the count of three, everyone displays their fingers.

Variations and Adaptations

Rather than using a “fist-of-five” for the closing process, try a Plus-Delta. Plus, what was of value today? Delta, what do you propose we change to produce more value.

Or, use the usual retrospective questions:

- What should we continue to do?
- What should we stop doing?
- What should we start doing?

Some groups establish a note-taker for the session. Short recaps of the topic, the key issues and any actions that result including who will do what by when suffice. Or, produce a mind map. Or, if there's someone with graphic talent, produce a one-page visual notes² for the sessions.

Questions

How long should Lean Coffee sessions be?

Allow at least 60 minutes for your sessions. You'll use 10 minutes to get started, 5 minutes to wrap up, leaving only 45 minutes for discussion. With that little time, the group might only get to discuss 4 topics. We find that 75 minutes is better. But in typical Lean fashion, run

² For an example of visual notes, see the notes for Lean Coffee Seattle at <http://seattle.leancoffee.org>

your own experiments.

What should we look for in a meeting place?

You'll want a location either in public or at work that you can use on a week-to-week basis without going through a scheduling process for every session. You'll want to have table-top space for the Personal Kanban plus seating for 8 – 10 people. If you are in a public setting, then look for a space that can be reserved and is just enough out-of-the-way so you can have your conversations without disturbing others or being disturbed.

How frequently should we meet?

Weekly is the desired time frame. If you're finding that too frequent then try 2 weeks, but anything longer is not likely to work.

Can we call in to a Lean Coffee?

This seems like a reasonable idea in these virtual times. Experiment. You might have problems with bad phone lines, distractions, asking to repeat the conversations, etc.

How do we manage large groups?

A large group is one that gets above 12 people. At that level you wouldn't expect that everyone would have the opportunity to speak. The general process is the same. Once you have the topics, pick the top two discussion topics and break into groups by topic. Agree to reconvene as a whole group at a set time, say 12 minutes. Then pick the next two groups, split as people want to and repeat the process.

You can also do this by theme. For instance, you might have an advanced group and a getting started group. Or, you might have people who are concerned with design issues while others are interested in construction. Run experiments!

What if we have more questions?

Contact us at leancoffee@leanproject.com with your questions or for any other help. You can find this document and others at www.leanproject.com/get-lpc-whitepapers/.

References

Lean Coffee home of groups around the world www.leancoffee.org

Personal Kanban <http://www.personalkanban.com/pk/>

Personal Kanban: Mapping the World, Navigating Life, by Jim Benson and Tonianne DeMaria Barry <http://goo.gl/I5lCB>

Open Space <http://www.openspaceworld.org/>

How to Run a Lean Coffee, by Agile Weekly, <http://goo.gl/FqvQBw>