

Lean Training Buyers Guide

How to evaluate, compare, and choose the right
lean training approach for your organization

A practical resource from Visionary Products USA Inc.

1. Why Experiential Lean Training Works

Most organizations introduce lean through classroom training: slide decks, lectures, and maybe a few exercises. The information is accurate, but the retention is poor. Research consistently shows that people remember approximately 10% of what they hear in a lecture, but up to 75% of what they learn through practice and direct experience.

This is the fundamental challenge of lean education. Lean is not a body of knowledge to be memorized—it is a set of principles and practices that only make sense when people experience them firsthand. You cannot truly understand one-piece flow by looking at a diagram. You understand it by watching work-in-progress pile up under batch processing, then experiencing the dramatic improvement when you switch to single-piece flow yourself.

The Engagement Gap

Traditional lean training methods share a common limitation: they position participants as passive receivers of information. Even well-designed workshops with group discussion still rely on the facilitator to carry the learning. Simulation-based training flips this dynamic. Participants become active decision-makers in a realistic scenario. They experience problems before being told about solutions. They generate their own insights rather than receiving someone else's conclusions.

This matters because the hardest part of lean implementation is not teaching the concepts—it is overcoming resistance to change. When employees experience the improvement themselves, the resistance dissolves. They stop asking “why should we change?” and start asking “why didn't we do this sooner?”

What practitioners say:

“I've used simulation-based lean training more than 200 times over 18 years. It is engaging, educational, fun, and leaves a positive memorable impression with participants at all levels of the organization.”

— Mike Osterling, President, Osterling Consulting, Inc.

2. Comparing Your Training Options

When planning a lean training initiative, most organizations consider some combination of the following approaches. Each has trade-offs in cost, time, engagement, and scalability. The matrix below provides a side-by-side comparison to help you evaluate which approach—or combination—fits your situation.

Criterion	External Consultant	Multi-Day Seminar	E-Learning / Video	DIY Simulation	Simulation Kit
Cost per person (first session)	\$200–\$600+	\$300–\$500+	\$50–\$150	\$50–\$200 + design time	\$96–\$128
Criterion	External Consultant	Multi-Day Seminar	E-Learning / Video	DIY Simulation	Simulation Kit
Cost per person (10th reuse)	Same	Same	Same	Materials only	Under \$10
Time investment	1–2 full days	2–5 days	Self-paced (hours)	Weeks to design	1–1.5 hours
Engagement level	Variable	Moderate	Low (passive)	Variable	Very high (hands-on)
Facilitator required?	External (recurring \$)	External	No	Internal (heavy prep)	Internal (20 min prep)
Reusable?	No (per visit)	No (per person)	Yes	Yes	Unlimited
Concepts per session	Broad	Deep but time-heavy	Narrow	Depends on design	7+ lean concepts
Proven at scale?	Varies	Varies	Varies	Untested	48+ Fortune 500 cos.

Key Takeaways from the Comparison

Simulation kits offer the lowest cost per person at scale. While the upfront investment (\$765–\$995 depending on the kit) is higher than a single e-learning license, the kit is reusable indefinitely. By the tenth session, you are training people for under \$10 per participant—a fraction of any alternative.

Time efficiency is dramatic. A full lean simulation session with discussion runs 60–90 minutes compared to 1–5 days for traditional approaches. This matters enormously in manufacturing environments where pulling people off the floor for extended training is operationally costly.

No external facilitator dependency. Simulation kits come with facilitator manuals that allow any internal trainer, lean champion, or manager to run the session after about 20 minutes of preparation. This eliminates the recurring cost and scheduling constraints of external consultants.

3. ROI Calculation Worksheet

Use this worksheet to calculate the cost per participant for your organization. Fill in the values for your situation to build the financial case for your preferred training approach.

	Your Numbers	Example
A. Kit or Training Investment		
Kit purchase price	\$ _____	\$765
Shipping cost	\$ _____	\$0 (domestic)
Total investment (A)	\$ _____	\$765
B. Usage Projections		
Participants per session	_____	8
Sessions planned (Year 1)	_____	12
Total participants (Year 1)	_____	96
C. Cost Per Participant		
First session: $A \div$ participants	\$ _____	\$95.63
After 6 sessions (48 people)	\$ _____	\$15.94
After 12 sessions (96 people)	\$ _____	\$7.97
D. Comparison		
External consultant (per person)	\$ _____	\$200–\$600
Multi-day seminar (per person)	\$ _____	\$300–\$500
Annual savings vs. consultant (D consultant \times total participants) – A	\$ _____	\$18,435–\$56,835

Tip for building your business case:

When presenting this to leadership, frame the ROI in terms they care about: not just cost savings, but also time savings (90 minutes vs. multiple days), reduced production downtime during training, and the ability to train new hires on an ongoing basis without recurring costs.

4. What to Look for in a Lean Simulation

Not all lean training simulations are created equal. Whether you are evaluating commercial products, considering building your own, or comparing simulation-based training to other approaches, these are the criteria that separate effective simulations from mediocre ones.

Progressive Complexity

The best simulations do not simply demonstrate a concept—they guide participants through a progression from problem recognition to solution implementation. Look for simulations that start with a baseline condition (typically traditional batch processing) and evolve through multiple phases, each introducing new lean concepts. This progressive structure mirrors real continuous improvement: it is iterative, builds on previous learnings, and shows measurable improvement at each stage.

Physical, Hands-On Interaction

Digital simulations and e-learning modules have their place, but physical simulations—where participants physically move materials, assemble products, and reorganize workstations—create a qualitatively different learning experience. The kinesthetic engagement produces stronger memory formation and makes abstract concepts tangible. When a participant physically experiences the chaos of batch production and then reorganizes into a cell, the lesson is embodied, not just understood intellectually.

Real-World Complications

Effective simulations include the messy realities of actual operations: supplier problems, quality issues, shifting demand, and skills gaps. Simulations that present only idealized conditions teach theory but not practice. The value of simulation-based training is precisely that participants learn to apply lean principles under realistic pressure.

Facilitator Accessibility

A simulation is only as good as the facilitator's ability to run it. Look for products that include comprehensive facilitator guides, checklists, pre-made presentation materials, and clear setup instructions. The ideal product allows a first-time facilitator to run a successful session with minimal preparation—typically under 30 minutes of review.

Concept Coverage

Evaluate which lean concepts the simulation teaches and how many can be covered in a single session. Strong simulations cover multiple interrelated concepts—not just one in isolation. For example, a manufacturing simulation might cover cellular layout, one-piece flow, pull systems, work balancing, lead time reduction, inventory management, and cross-training in a single 90-minute session.

Group Size Flexibility

Consider how many participants the simulation accommodates and whether it can be scaled. A simulation designed for 6–8 participants per kit can serve larger groups by running multiple kits simultaneously or by assigning observer roles to additional participants who rotate in during subsequent phases.

Evaluation Criterion	Questions to Ask	Red Flags
Progressive phases	How many phases? What concepts does each introduce?	Single-round demos with no progression
Physical materials	What do participants handle and build?	Software-only or paper-shuffling exercises
Realism	Are supplier issues, quality problems, and demand changes included?	Idealized scenarios with no disruptions
Facilitator support	Is a facilitator manual, checklist, and teaching aid included?	Requires extensive training to facilitate
Concept density	How many lean concepts are taught per session?	Only covers one or two concepts
Track record	Who has used it? How many times? In which industries?	No customer references or testimonials

5. How Organizations Use Lean Simulation Training

The following examples illustrate how different types of organizations have used simulation-based lean training to achieve their goals. These are drawn from real customer experiences.

The Lean Consultant: 200+ Client Engagements

A lean consulting firm principal adopted simulation training as the standard opening exercise for every new client engagement. Over 18 years, he has facilitated the exercise more than 200 times across organizations of every size and industry. The simulation serves as both a teaching tool and an icebreaker—it builds team engagement from day one and gives participants a shared reference experience that the consultant can reference throughout the remainder of the lean journey.

The key insight: a single kit investment has generated value across hundreds of client engagements, each time producing what the consultant describes as a “positive, memorable impression at all levels of the organization.”

The Manufacturing Executive: Full Buy-In from Day One

An assistant general manager at a windows and doors manufacturer used the simulation as the kickoff for a lean transformation initiative. The first session included both upper management and production workers—a deliberate choice to create shared understanding across levels. The result was immediate and universal buy-in, with the executive reporting that the simulation “delivers the perfect message” for launching lean.

The key insight: by including all levels in the same session, the simulation eliminated the common problem of leadership mandating lean while the floor resists. Everyone experienced the improvement together.

The Lean Implementation Specialist: First Step in Every New Environment

A lean implementation veteran with over 20 years of experience uses the airplane factory simulation as the first activity when entering any new manufacturing environment. He has facilitated it with every level of the company, from production floor technicians to CEOs, board members, and company owners—with 100% positive feedback from all participants.

The key insight: the simulation is universally accessible. It does not require prior lean knowledge, technical expertise, or even fluency in lean terminology. This makes it ideal for introducing lean to skeptical or unfamiliar audiences.

Common thread across all these examples:

The simulation is not positioned as “training” in the traditional sense. It is positioned as an experience that changes how people think about work. Learning happens through doing, and the discussion that follows each round is where the real insights emerge. This is why organizations with extensive lean programs still use simulation—it is the most efficient way to create the “aha moment” that makes all subsequent lean work easier.

6. Your Next Steps

You now have the framework to evaluate lean training approaches, calculate ROI for your organization, and assess simulation quality. Here is how to move forward:

1. **Use the ROI worksheet** to calculate cost per participant for your specific situation. This becomes the financial foundation of your business case.
2. **Identify your training audience.** Are you training a single team, rolling out lean across multiple departments, or introducing lean to a new facility? The scope determines how many kits you need and which ones to start with.
3. **Choose the right simulation for your environment.** Manufacturing floors benefit from production-focused simulations. Office environments and service organizations may need office-specific simulations. Organizations with sub-assembly operations can use scheduling-focused simulations.
4. **Plan your first session.** Block 90 minutes, secure a room with table space for 6–8 people, and review the facilitator manual (about 20 minutes of prep). Most organizations find that the first session generates enough enthusiasm to justify an ongoing training program.
5. **Measure the impact.** Before the session, ask participants to rate their understanding of lean concepts and their openness to change. Repeat the same questions afterward. This simple pre/post measurement gives you data to justify continued investment.

Ready to explore simulation-based lean training?

Visit store.lean-zone.com to see the full product line, read customer testimonials, and compare kits side by side.

- **Production Methodologies Kit (S2500)** — \$765 — Cellular manufacturing, one-piece flow, pull systems, work balancing. Best for introducing lean.
- **Lean Office Kit** — \$945 — Lean principles for paperwork-heavy office environments and approval workflows.
- **Sub-Assembly Kit** — \$995 — Scheduling and sequencing for sub-assembly operations.

Questions? Call 817-509-0680 or visit store.lean-zone.com/contact-us

Lean Zone® training kits have been used by over 48 Fortune 500 companies across 28+ countries. Every kit ships with a complete facilitator manual, teaching aids, and everything needed to run your first session.