



# The Lean-Fitness Analogy

An aid to understanding the  
essence of lean thinking

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Graphics: Hanneke Wellian [www.wellianillustration.com](http://www.wellianillustration.com)

Music: «Ukulele» from [Bensound.com](http://Bensound.com)

**LERC**  
Lean Enterprise Research Centre

**lcs** | lean  
competency  
system

## How it started

One day, a researcher in the Lean Enterprise Research Centre announced she was going to run a marathon. This inspired a few others to do the same and start training.

After a few weeks of effort, one of those training mentioned that it was hard work - and **“a bit like going lean.”**

This got them thinking and before long a story that linked lean and fitness took shape and the analogy was created...

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So, think of “going lean” in the same way of thinking about “getting fit”

**At a high level...**

Generally, people do not challenge the sense and logic of keeping fit and exercising, as a means be good at our chosen sport or pastime, for a healthy and prolonged life - and we accept the validity of universal exercise principles that make us fit.



Similarly, most managers accept the business logic of maximising customer value, improving flow, reducing lead times, removing waste, improving quality, continually innovating and having engaged staff to make the organisation more effective.

But there's plenty of debate about...

What precisely should I do? → how should I do it? → when should I do it? → how can I sustain it?

...and even can I be bothered?



In what ways are fitness and lean similar?

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# Lean and fitness both...

- 1 Are an ongoing journey with sustainability challenges
- 2 Have core principles and many different underlying methodologies
- 3 Do not have a “one size fits all”
- 4 Cannot be achieved with quick fixes...and need a long term perspective
- 5 Need sound and well-structured planning
- 6 Require motivation, positive thinking & recognition



**Lean & fitness are  
both journeys**

# There is no 'end point'

There is no single point at which you “become lean” or “become fit.” They both can be considered as **continuums**.



Leanness and fitness are relative and dynamic states. Where you need to be on the continuum - and your need to sustain it - depends on your objectives, competitors, capacity, resources and motivation.

Fitness & Lean are **means** to achieve your goals.

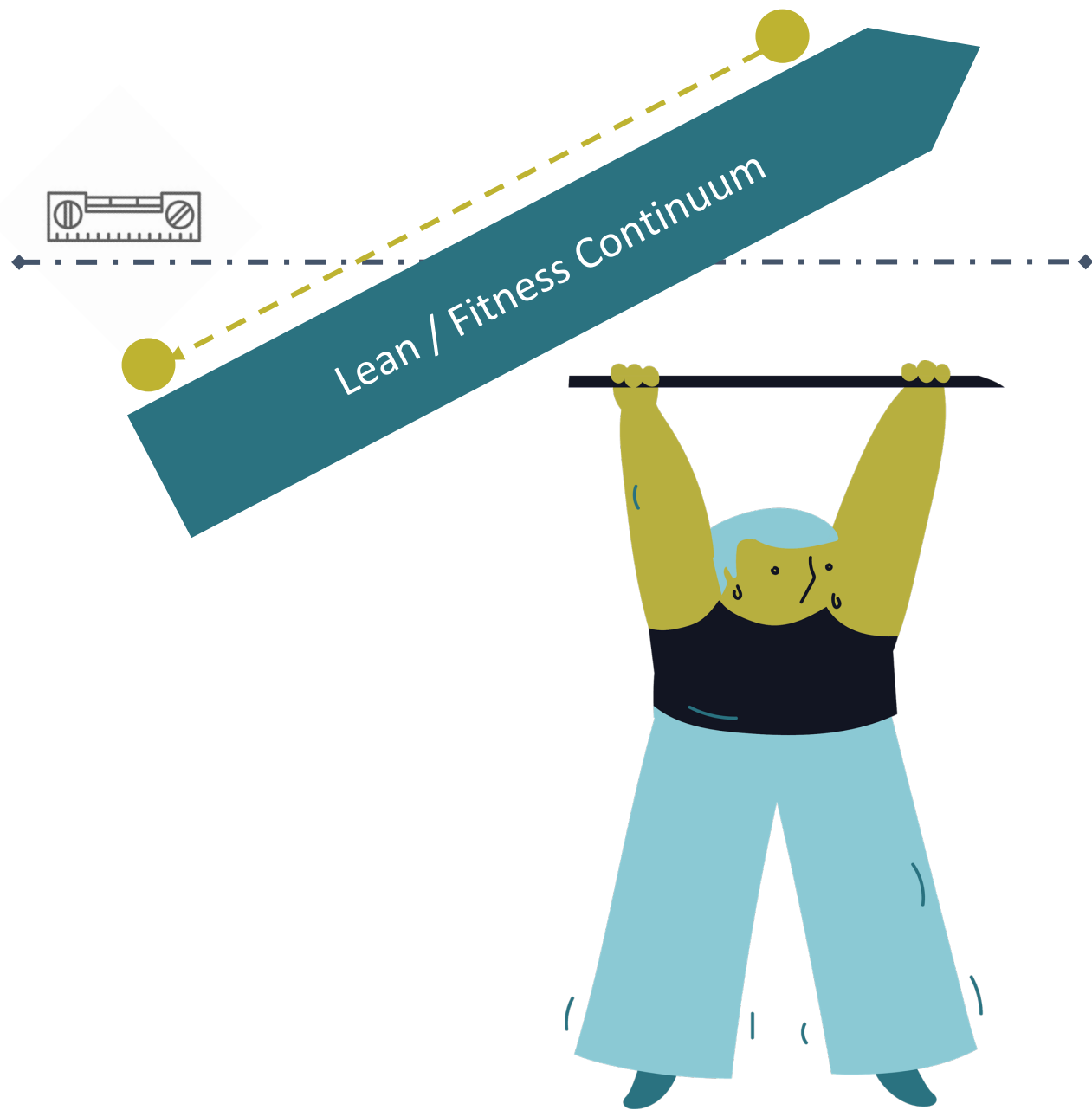
## Fitness:

To play a sport, to feel good, to become healthier, to live longer

## Lean:

To stay in business, to grow, to thrive, to innovate

**Don't lose sight of your purpose - why you need to keep fit or why you need to stay lean.**

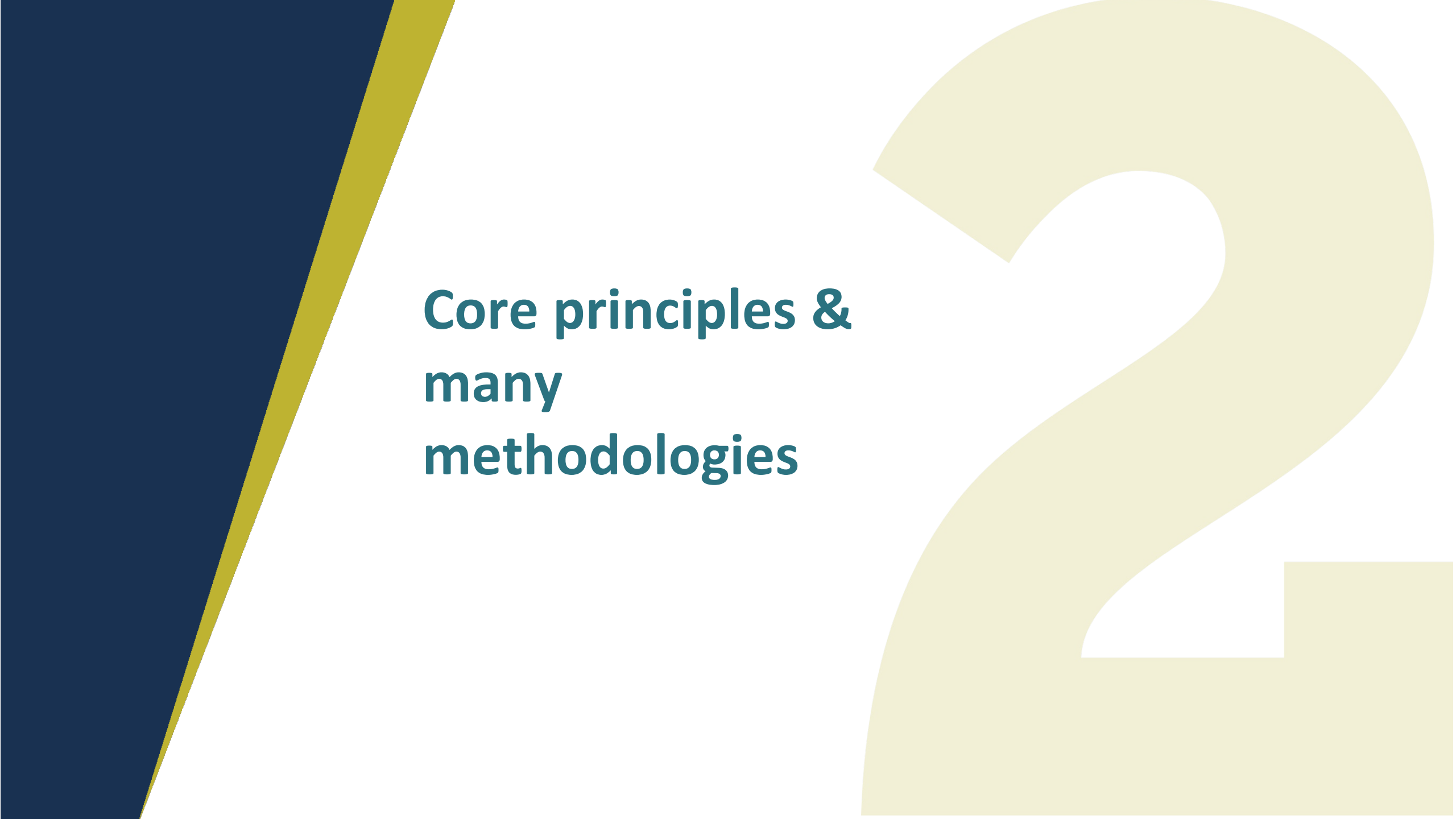


The key point about the continuum is that it is not **level!**

This means that unless you proactively maintain lean/fitness oriented behaviours, you will slide down the continuum.

**So finding ways to incentivise the right positive behaviours is critical to improving and sustaining your fitness or leanness.**





**Core principles &  
many  
methodologies**

# Lean & fitness both have underlying core principles

These are universally applicable to any person (fitness) or organisation (lean).

...though there are many underlying methods and techniques that align to these principles

## Lean Principles:

Optimise Flow  
Understand Demand  
Deliver value  
Remove waste  
Continuously improve  
Engage & empower

## Fitness Principles:

Progression  
Regularity  
Overload  
Variety  
Recovery  
Balance  
Specificity

Consider the numerous fitness methods...





There are many exercise methods that align to core principles and deliver fitness for different types of sports and activities

Consider the various continuous improvement models and methods...

PDCA

TQM

Lean Thinking

Lean Six Sigma

Systems  
Thinking

Service  
Improvement

DMAIC

AMI

Operational  
Excellence

Lean  
Production

Continuous  
Improvement

Performance  
Excellence

STAR

VCPCIA

Appreciative  
Inquiry

Agile

Lean start up

Kata

And many more tools & techniques..

## Your key lean/fitness decision\*:

“ Which method(s) will enable me to become lean/fit so I can achieve my purpose effectively?



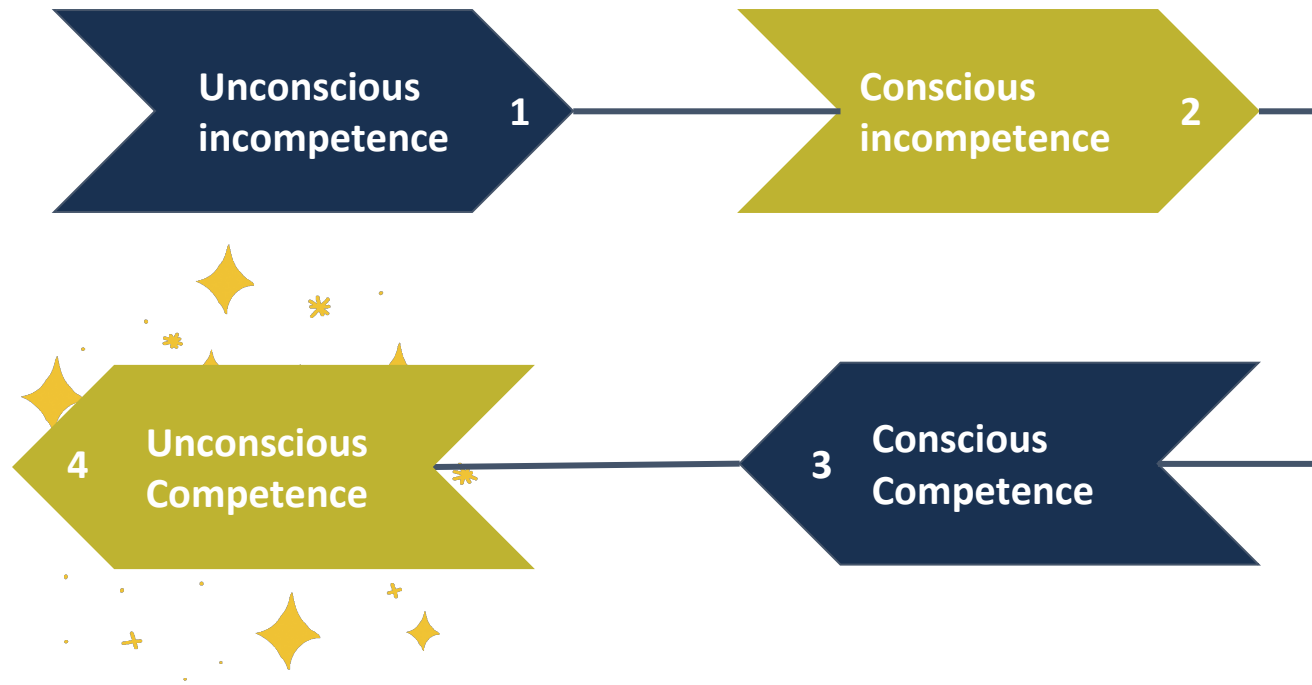
\*Assuming you actually want to get fit or become lean...

If you failed to become fit or **sustain your fitness**,  
would you say that “fitness does not work?”

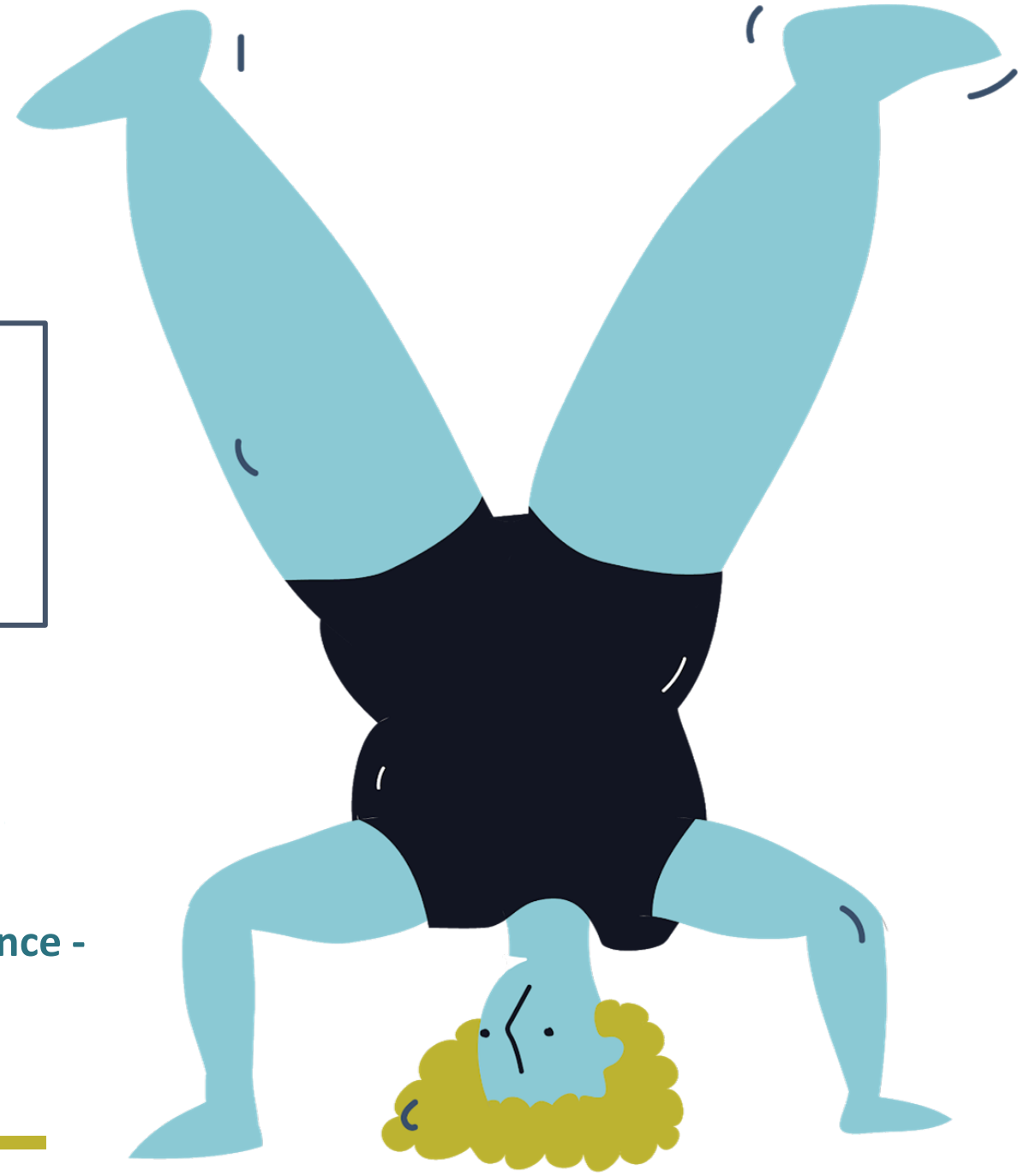
And if you failed to become lean or **sustain your  
leanness**, would you say that “lean does not work?”

**No...you either: chose the wrong method, were not motivated sufficiently,  
were not supported enough, it was the wrong time, you were not ready...**

# But what is sustainability?



- Sustainability usually involves a journey from **unconscious incompetence** to **unconscious competence** - where being lean/fit becomes a habit.
  - Getting there takes discipline, time and effort!
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**No “one size fits  
all” solution**

# No “one size fits all” solution

When getting fit, we recognise we are all unique in our own ways and we all possess different attributes and characteristics.

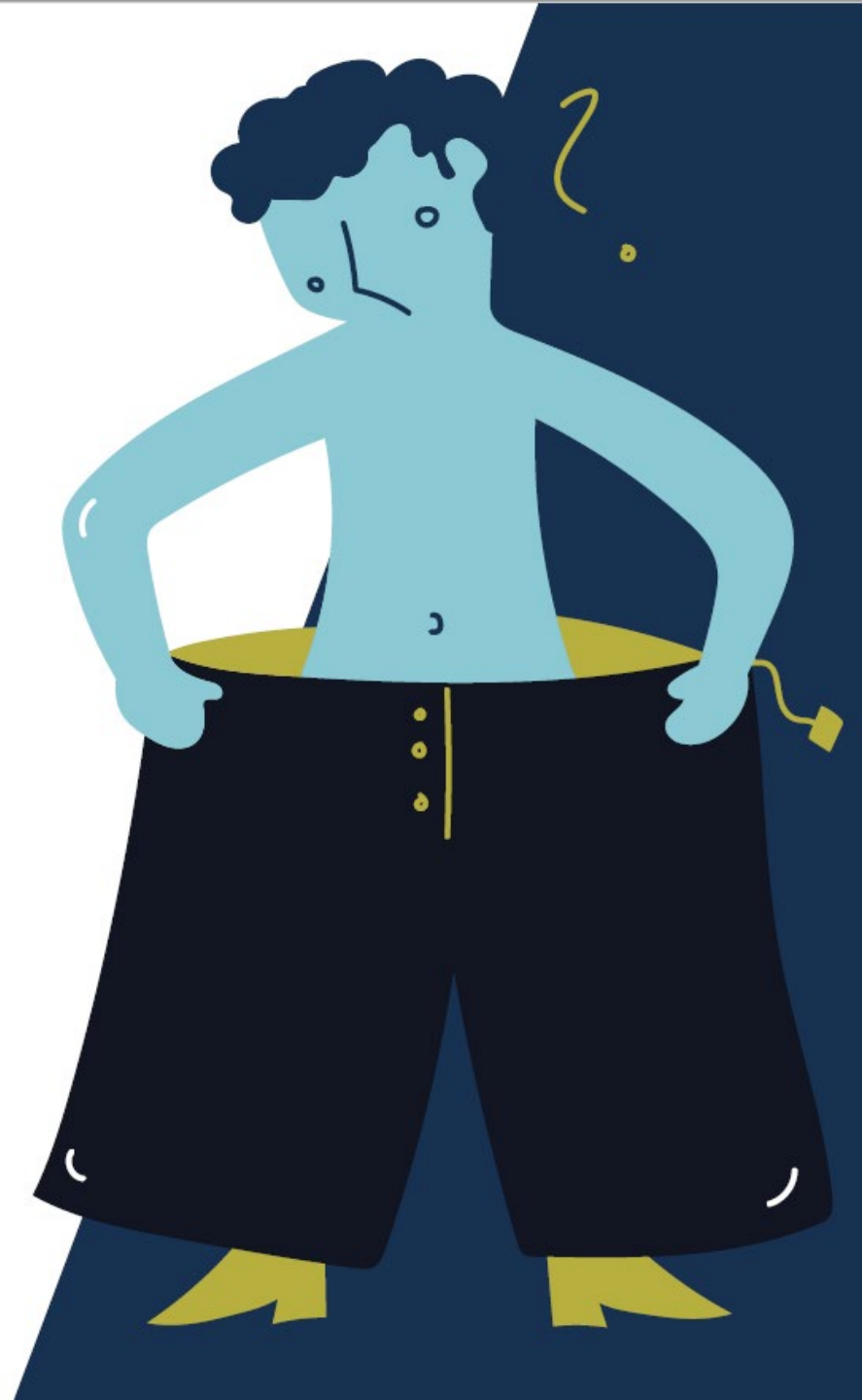
So our chosen fitness/lean solution will depend on our circumstances.

## Factors influencing our fitness approach:

- Age
- Competition
- Medical history
- Lifestyle
- Sport or activity
- Physiology

## Factors influencing our lean approach:

- Business sector
- Process type
- Size
- Competition & market
- Products
- Customers





## Both require a **contingent** approach



“Depending on or influenced by something else”

- **Non-prescriptive**
  - **No single best one way**
  - **Adaptable**
  - **Contextualised**
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**There are no  
quick fixes**

Lean & fitness are about incremental improvement over time



Success in lean/fitness is not about improving **one** thing 100%. It's about improving **ninety nine** things 1%.

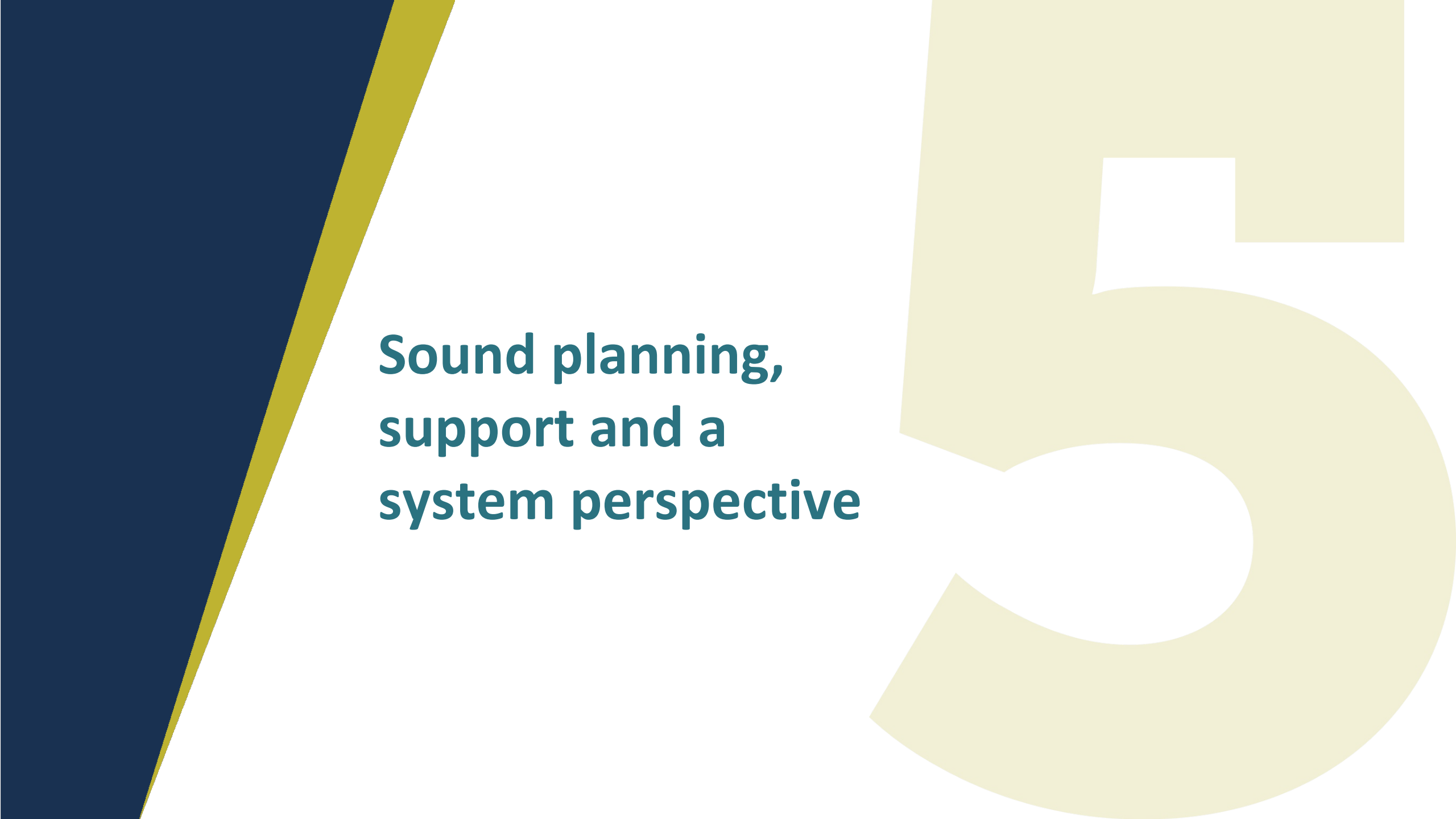


However, there is room for the occasional radical breakthrough...

Dick Fosbury caused a paradigm shift in the high jump with his unique style of jumping. He achieved a gold medal in the 1968 Olympics.

Occasionally radical breakthroughs will be needed in lean implementations.





**Sound planning,  
support and a  
system perspective**

# Success in fitness and lean is built on sound planning

- Clear objectives linked to purpose
- Appropriate performance measures
- Relevant critical success factors
- Activity plans aligned to objectives

Plans must be realistic, achievable, timely and aligned.





## Both need an integrated approach

The whole system needs to work together.

**Fitness:** not just specific muscles, but your whole body and even your mind.

**Lean:** not just the department, but also the value stream, the organisation and even the extended enterprise



# Fitness and lean can both benefit from support

Ultimately, you must do it to yourself - not have it done to you.

To help start the journey

To learn from collaboration

To grasp the key skills

To build self-confidence

To network & gain fresh ideas



**Motivation, positive  
thinking & recognition**

## Motivation is key to both Lean & Fitness

- You must want to do it!
- Engaged in all aspects
- Willingness to change and adapt
- Keep setting higher goals

Don't wait for your crisis.  
What's your motivation?



# Positive thinking is key to Lean & Fitness

- Consider the possibilities
- Envisage success
- Think half full, not half empty
- Don't be an anchor dragger

Attitude & Behaviour are critical!



## Recognition & Reward in fitness & lean

- For a sense of achievement and worth
- For motivation
- For sustainability
- To celebrate success



## So, are you ready?

- You need to be prepared mentally and physically to embark on your fitness programme.
- You need to be “organisationally ready” to go lean.
- But don’t try too much, too soon!



## Summary: The Lean-Fitness Analogy

- Dynamic states → no completion end-points
- Purposively maintain the right behaviours → or you slip back
- Key universal, high level principles → many underlying methods
- Sustainability → requires developing unconscious habits
- No one-size-fits-all solution → “contingent” approach
- No quick fixes → incremental improvement over time
- Planning & support → systemic approach
- Reward → Intrinsic motivation is crucial
- Means to an end → linked to an overall purpose





# Just do it!

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[www.leancompetency.org](http://www.leancompetency.org)

