

Governmental Agencies are Ripe with Lean Opportunities

By Asbury Lockett

In the several years that I have spent providing lean training and implementation assistance to both manufacturing and non-manufacturing organizations, I have heard a familiar refrain: “We’re different.” Anticipating this response to lean, I’d usually try to head this comment off at the pass by explaining that industries as diverse as health care and construction, not to mention all manner of manufacturers, have proven that the lean philosophy is applicable and beneficial to them. Some participants in training classes could not see the link between the lean training and what they did on a day-to-day basis. Therefore, they were never able to gain benefits from lean because they never made it past an overview course to try any of the techniques out in their own organizations.

Simulations have been a very effective tool in allowing participants to finally “get it”. My original lean training simulations of several years ago just involved a simulated manufacturing floor of an electronic product. In response to those who didn’t see the applicability of the simulation to their own experiences, simulations were developed for specific industries (i.e. food), and for administrative areas (i.e. a sales order process). Each new simulation involved different examples showing what the wastes of lean actually looked like in the particular environment being showcased. The presentation of the lean tools that accompanied these simulations were modified with certain ones being emphasized while others—with little applicability to administrative processes, for instance—were downplayed or not presented at all.

With this evolution over the past few years there are still those whose reaction, even to an administratively-based lean training and simulation, was still the old refrain: “We’re different.” Belief in this statement freezes the process and the gains from lean are never realized since their efforts go no further than sitting through an “interesting” one day training class and simulation.

Of the participants in lean overview training the group most reluctant to move forward with any aspects of lean were governmental agencies. While many agencies would parade participants through lean overview training, the outcome was very predictable: no one was willing to move forward. Finally, I stumbled upon a county whose elected official was from manufacturing. His commitment—and salesmanship—got them past the one day training to actually embarking on some kaizen events. The results? Here are a few:

1. Employees going through the process became vocal lean advocates. (Other departments began asking when their turn was for a kaizen event).
2. Process cycle times were dramatically cut.
3. Through standardized work, longtime employees who dreaded coming back from vacation fearing that their desks would be a mess now found that the work that needed to be done was properly documented.
4. Workloads were made visual so impossible requests could be refused based on the data.

Governmental agencies are ripe with tremendous opportunities to apply lean for effective results. But do you know what? They really are different. These differences really do make the effective transfer of lean concepts and tools difficult to comprehend. Here are but a few things that do make this group “different”:

1. ***The term “lean” has an extremely negative connotation.***
Most governmental agencies have encountered fiscally challenging times within the past 10 years. Many of the “old-timers” have seen involuntary reductions in staff. They were told that they were to do more with less – they were to become “lean.” Taxpayers felt that government was too “fat”. Employees strongly associate the term “lean” with these “bad” times.

With our governmental agency clients, we will say the philosophy and techniques are based on the very successful lean manufacturing concepts, but we will never use the term “lean” again. Instead we refer to it as the Governmental Agency Process Streamlining (GAPS™) Program. We have found that this avoids people turning off to all of the concepts due to the emotional impact of a single word.

2. ***Reducing the “order to cash” cycle is meaningless in their environment.***

This makes perfect sense for all entities where there is effort expended and the payoff doesn’t occur until the customer is satisfied with the result provided. Among government agencies, citizens pay for their operation prior to receiving services through taxes. Additional fees may be collected for specific services, but these are often collected prior to the service being provided. Even for services paid for after the fact (i.e. garbage collection), the satisfaction standard to warrant not paying the fee without repercussions would need to be extreme (i.e. the trash hasn’t been picked up at all for over a month). We have changed this cycle in our training from “order to cash” to “customer request to customer fulfillment.”

3. ***Hesitation or downright refusal to make the tough choices***

Many governmental employees have very long tenures in their respective departments, while elected officials come and go every 4-8 years. To get re-elected, these officials must tell citizens what they want to hear. Generally, this is lowering taxes and doing more with less. In some locales, spending an hour with a citizen explaining something he or she could have read in a published brochure or pulled from a governmental Web site is part of what the elected official has decided is necessary customer service. At the same time, this department may be under tremendous pressure to fulfill the requests of all citizens in less time than it currently takes. Although this is the stated goal, the tactics of achieving this goal is left to the individual departments. Without guidance from the top, the stress level in the department accelerates as they are left to their own devices to figure out the priorities on any given day.

4. ***Additional lean tools are needed to effectively reduce cycle times.***

The behavior of citizens requesting services can greatly impact the overall cycle times of the processes. Submitting incomplete applications, having the governmental entity make copies of something the citizen could have done at the time of application, and calling for status prior to the lapse of the stated lead times are all behaviors which slow the overall process cycle time. Because of the major impact of these additional wastes in the system, we have added a lean tool for governmental agencies called “customer collaboration.”

5. ***Very few people can say “no”.***

While the idea of empowered manufacturing employees being able to “stop the line” when there is a quality problem is no longer uncommon, this idea has generally not filtered down to governmental entities. When most anything is requested, the harshest response to even a virtually impossible task is “we will try our best.” Responses such as “we just don’t have the resources to do it” or “what can I let slide in the meantime” are typically viewed as unacceptable. The result is people trying very hard to meet conflicting objectives that simply are not attainable.

As the old baseball analogy goes, “You can’t make it around the bases with one foot on first.” Our company is putting the finishing touches on a simulation of a municipal permitting process making a lean (GAPS™) transformation. This simulation should resonate with many governmental entities allowing them to “get it” as it applies to their environment.

As a professional community advocating lean, our job is to get people at all levels of the organization to begin envisioning the possibilities so they are open to giving lean a try. Moving

them off first base may not be easy but the rewards stemming from a happier, more effective workplace are immense.

About the Author:

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