Can Lean Six Sigma Be Applied in County Government?

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Lean Six Sigma is a system designed to increase efficiency and enhance effectiveness in an organization. Can it work in County Government? Yes, it can, but it may be met with a few obstacles. I believe implementation of Lean Six Sigma in government agencies can make a huge difference in employee morale, customer service and the development of efficient processes. The question is, can Lean Six

Sigma infiltrate government bureaucracy? Has government dug itself so deep in inefficiency by adding unnecessary processes on top of unnecessary processes that it cannot see clearly anymore?

Personally, I don't think it has, but it will take a few dedicated Department Heads like Mr. Dean Logan of the Los Angeles County Registrar-Recorder/County Clerk's (RR/CC) office to make a major impact. It will take leaders who are not afraid to shake up the system and sometimes take a step backward to move things forward. Leaders who will really look at the root causes of inefficiencies and not be afraid to admit that mistakes have been made.

This article will touch on some of the ups and downs of Lean Six Sigma implementation in county government that I experienced while working on the process improvement team at RR/CC. I believe it may provide some of the reasons for the lack of true efficiency, poor customer service and low employee morale and motivation.

A Case Study in County Government

Getting Started

The RR/CC was experiencing a 17-day backlog in processing mail-in requests for birth certificates. A basic description of the steps of this process was as follows:

1. Mail picked up from mail room
2. Mail opened, sorted and assigned
3. Birth record processed
4. Birth record mailed to the customer

Seems simple enough… right? Well, not quite!

One of the tools used in Lean Six Sigma is to conduct a GEMBA walk, which is a Japanese term meaning, "go to the place." With the assistance of a certified Lean Six Sigma consultant, Tracy O'Rourke of Catalyst, that's exactly what we did. We went to the place where this

process was being done to see each phase. Another tool of Lean Six Sigma is to comprise a team of experts, but people who are none other than the people who actually do the work. A representative from every step in the process participated in a process walk to see what actually happened to these requests as they came through the doors of the RR/CC's office. Suffice it to say… we were all stunned at the actual process.

Digging Deeper

Let's dig deeper into the process to find out why!

1. Mail pick up

Staff performing this function was physically located on the 1st floor of the building and traveled to the 5th floor to pick up the mail. The mail was then taken to the basement for envelope opening, counting, sorting and batching into stacks of 50. After the opening, sorting and batching were complete, the mail was packed up for delivery to the 1st floor.

2. Mail opened, sorted and assigned

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Once received on the 1st floor, the contents of the envelope were removed and analyzed to determine if it was an actual request for a birth record and if so that a payment was included. Requests were then sorted as "GOOD" OR "RETURN". The good were re-sorted into batches of 50 and the bad were re-routed. The supervisor then assigned the new batches to cashiers.

3. Certificates processed

This part of the process included processing the payment by entering the payment data in the system and requesting for the document to be searched either online (current birth record) or offline (older birth record). After the record was found it was either

printed or copied onto certified paper and then assigned to an embosser to affix the official seal on the card.

4. Certificate mailed

Finally, the document is assigned to staff who then stuffed the outgoing envelope and placed it in a bin to be delivered to the 5th floor mailroom for mailing to the customer.

Approximate Processing Time:

- 1 to 1.5 hours to retrieve mail and open
- 30-60 minutes to extract documents and batch
- One minute per document for data entry
- 5-10 minutes per document to cashier
- Other staff assigned to embossing, stuffing and mailing documents
- Staff were also assigned other duties (telephone, kiosk) which interrupted mail processing

Although there were approximately 25 staff assigned to processing an average 331 requests per day (approximately 13 requests per person per 8 hour day), the wait time for customers was approximately 30 days.

One of the goals of Lean Six Sigma is to eliminate waste. The 8 Wastes of Lean are:

1. Transportation- Unnecessary movement of materials around the organization
2. Inventory- Any supply in excess of one-piece flow
3. Motion- Any movement of people that does not add value to the product or services
4. Waiting- Waiting for man, machine, materials, information, etc.
5. Overproduction- Making more earlier…faster than the next process needs it.
6. Over-processing- Effort that adds no value to the product or service from the customer's standpoint.
7. Defects- Information, products and services are inaccurate and/or incomplete.
8. Underutilized talent- Not utilizing people's experience, skills, knowledge or creativity

7 out of 8 Wastes of Lean were identified in the mail-in birth record process!! They did not have e[illegible]

Implementing Improvement

The plan to decrease processing time and provide faster, efficient customer service was simple:

- We created one-piece flow as much as possible to eliminate the multiple handoffs, duplicate batching, sorting and counting. Instead of handing the document from one person to another to complete steps in the process, one person is accountable for the entire transaction. The average processing time per document was 6.52 minutes. An employee working an average of 6 hours per day could process 54 documents. What a time savings!
- We relocated the person responsible for picking up the mail on the 5th floor, taking it to the basement to process and then packaging it all up and delivering it to the first floor for process. He is now housed on the 1st floor, goes to the 5th floor to get the mail and returns to the 1st floor to process it. No unpacking and re-packing. No duplicate batching or sorting. Just pick up and process. You'd be surprised at the amount of time saved.
- Lastly, four employees were loaned from another division to help eliminate the backlog. Within 2 weeks the backlog was gone.

The Results

...in a few weeks reduced the processing time **from 17 days to 1 day. Yes, only 1 day!**

- After process mapping, brainstorming and analyzing data, we implemented a plan which took half a day to put in place and in a few weeks **reduced the processing time from 17 days to 1 day.** ***Yes, only 1 day!***
- Staff assigned to the online process was reallocated to the offline process which **reduced the processing time for that operation from 3 weeks to one week**.

They have been able to maintain this level of service for over six months now.

So what were some of the ups and downs we encountered in initial application of Lean Six Sigma?

The *Ups* We Encountered During Our Lean Six Sigma Application

1. We had buy-in from top management upon inception

In fact, it was the Department Head and Chief Deputy of the department who had the desire and courage to seek an improvement methodology such as Lean Six Sigma which led them to bring on a consultant and actually assign staff to learn and implement LSS. This, I believe, was vital to the success of the program. The Department Head of this agency eats and sleeps efficiency and was determined to run a more efficient and customer friendly operation. Mr. Logan made sure his top managers were briefed on LSS methodologies which opened the door for the team to take action.

2. A successful LSS program relies heavily on subject matter experts

Who better knows the process and ways to improve it than those doing the work? Our battle was getting them to open up after they had been shut down for so long. One manager even stated “we are in the business of lines, that’s what we do, that’s how we save your jobs”. Inefficiency and poor service saves jobs, but somehow that just doesn’t sound quite right. To be included in the process improvement was like a warm embrace for the staff doing the work. After a while they started pouring out suggestions. Subsequently, they made other improvements in their area and continue to seek improvements. It was infectious. People really do want to work smarter, not harder. No longer were they just employees, they were part of the team a member of the organization and they were proud!

3. Accountability and pride of ownership increased

The Ups: Improved customer service, improved employee morale, increased efficiency, accountability, cost savings, skill building.
...A culture change!

With one person being responsible for processing a document in its entirety, there is accountability. As staff gained knowledge of the entire process their skill level increased. As one employee put it, "Now I can do it all". It is their signature on the record they are mailing out, they handled it all, not just a piece of it. They personally make a difference.

4. Staff development increased

With the backlog eliminated staff are able to devote time to other projects and improvements. One employee stated that she now has time to do special projects for management and it felt good to be caught up. They actually have time to think about other improvements. And they have! Management has learned to listen and staff has been freed to think and suggest.

5. Customer satisfaction

Positive letters from the public are few and far between in the public sector but one customer stated that she greatly appreciated receiving her son's birth certificate in one week of her mailing the request. Although the website indicated that it may take up to 30 days, she mailed her request on a Monday and received the processed document in the mail on Saturday. Customer service should always be this timely and efficient.

The *Downs* We Encountered During Our Lean Six Sigma Application

Throughout the implementation process we noticed some areas that greatly impacted efficient operations in government. These are not walls that RR/CC faces alone but are seen throughout many county government departments. They do not stop the process of continuously improving but may have some impact how quickly an improvement can be realized.

1. Resistance to Change

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For most people there is a general resistance to change. Skepticism and reluctance to let go of the old way of doing things. It was very important to meet with staff first to ease their fears and let them know that we were there to look at the process and not the people. This had to be reiterated multiple times.

2. Work Measures

Employees were not governed by any measure of productivity. Someone can process 10 documents and another can process 30. There really was no way to measure productivity and line management seemed to be reluctant to even discuss the issue because of possible union involvement. There has to be some medium ground to determine an average number of documents a person can process in a day, hour or week. Work measurement not only gives management a tool to accurately appraise performance but it also gives the employee a goal, a vision, something to strive for. People perish with no vision. No wonder there is so much complacency in government; there is no level of excellency to strive for. What do we value as an organization? Quick processing? And exactly how do we quantify "quick"? Do we value customer service? How do we know the level of service we are providing if we don't have measures? When we completed time studies to determine the sustainability of the improvements we found that on average staff could actually process an average of 54 documents per day. With current staffing levels they could process 1,350 documents per day. On average, 331 documents were received per day.

3. Excessive Employee Absence and Restrictions

Although the mail processing section had more than enough staff to process the requests timely, they experienced a high volume of employee absence and restrictions due to medical reasons. Although programs like the Family Medical Leave Act (FMLA) was designed to help employees keep their jobs when faced with medical restrictions for themselves or close family members, it sometimes cripples government agencies by reducing productivity. They can be granted up to twelve weeks off work and the only criterion is that the worked at least 1,250 hours in the previous employment year. When a person goes out on FMLA or has some form of restriction, the work

still has to get done. That position is in limbo until the person decides to come back to work. How do agencies do? Create and justify another position. The work needs to get done. Maybe there should be some criteria for the privilege of FMLA, such as review of attendance and performance records to determine eligibility. I don't know the solution and understand that these policies were put in place for a reason, but the criteria may need to be re-visited.

	25 Staff	19 Staff*
Daily		
Productive Work Hours	175	133
Actual Work Hours	101.5	67.5
Loss of Time	73.5	65.5
Monthly		
Productive Work Hours	3,792	2,882
Actual Work Hours	2,199	1,462
Loss of Time	1,592	1,419
Annual		
Productive Work Hours	45,500	34,580
Actual Work Hours	26,390	17,550
Loss of Time	19,110	17,030

*6 Staff on FMLA taken out

There is definitely a loss of productivity due to the unknown work schedules of staff who are on Restrictions, Medical Leave, FMLA and any other policies allowing extensive time off from work.

The column indicating 25 staff includes those under FMLA. The loss of time indicates hours.

The column indicating 19 staff does not include those under FMLA. They are not factored into the productivity loss at all.

4. Changing Processes Without Data

We also noticed that some processes were changed because of a complaint without really looking into the root cause of the problem. In another instance an entire new section was created, but the same problems existed. An additional day of processing time was added which created a delay to the customer.

Conclusion: Lean Six Sigma Can Work in Government

There were barriers, but not mountains.
In spite of the downs we were able to make some very positive and effective improvements. There were barriers, but not mountains. Barriers can be removed or circumvented to get to the desired end.

Can Lean Six Sigma work in government? ABSOLUTELY! I think it is a very valuable tool. There are many processes in government that can be streamlined to operate more efficiently. Some very important tips that I learned throughout this process are:

- Get buy-in at the top level; build teams at the working level.
- Don't overreact to errors. Government agencies need to be careful not to overreact to a complaint and to really utilize the tools of LSS to find the root cause. If it is a one-time occurrence and the process works, it was simply an error. These will happen occasionally. Even Six Sigma allows 3 defects per million occurrences.
- Focus on the customer.
- Create a Vision. Work measures are vital for employees and agencies. How do we get to where we need to be if we don't have a clue where that is or where we are?
- Dedicate staff and/or hire an outside consultant to get the ball rolling.

Remember, there is always room for improvement!

Ready to start taking action towards improvement? Register for Green Belt Training & Certification and begin challenging the process today!

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