Is This the Best We Can Do?
Making Continuous Improvement a Core Value
By Richard S. Reagan and Joseph Weatherford

A n anecdote about Winston Lord and Henry Kissinger provides a glimpse into the heart of the idea behind continuous improvement and Lean thinking. The story goes that Winston Lord, during his time as special assistant to then-National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger, submitted a draft of a Presidential Foreign Policy Report to Kissinger for review. The next morning, Kissinger called Lord into his office and asked simply, “Is this the best you can do?” Lord replied that he thought so, but he would give it another shot. So he revised the report and resubmitted it. And the following morning Kissinger called Lord into his office again and asked, “Are you sure this is the best you can do?” Disheartened, Lord again took the report and made improvements. The same scenario played out six more times. Finally, after Lord submitted the report for the ninth time, Kissinger again asked if it was the best he could do. This time, Lord replied, “I know this is the best I can do: I can’t possibly improve one more word.” Kissinger looked up at him and said, “In that case, now I’ll read it.”

Amusing, but what does it have to do with Lean and continuous improvement? Everything. The moral of this story is that only your best work should be advanced to the next level, station, or person in the value stream. Of course, perfection cannot be a standard; instead, it is an ideal we should have as our goal. Continuous improvement is a theory that pursues the unattainable goal of perfection with the idea that there is always room for improvement.

Winston Lord found ways to improve his report eight times. And although he eventually felt that he’d exhausted every opportunity to improve his work, other opportunities to make it better probably still existed. But that report had to be produced and delivered in a certain timeframe. Lord had other responsibilities to take care of, and after reviewing a document eight times, he may have reached an improvement plateau. Herein lies another important point of continuous improvement: “Best” and “perfect” are two entirely different things. The best that you can do is a ceiling of capabilities, circumstances, and experience; perfection is wide open. Lord reached his ceiling for this particular report, but where do you think his floor was the next time he delivered a document to Kissinger for review?

GWINNETT COUNTY’S APPROACH

Moving away for a moment from the “why,” let’s discuss the “how.” Specifically, how is it possible to realize the promise of Lean? This issue of Government Finance Review discusses many aspects of Lean methods, including Kaizen, the Plan-Do-Check-
Act cycle, and value stream mapping. Gwinnett County, Georgia, has used all of these methods in its Department of Financial Services for many years, with a good deal of success. This approach has produced several significant projects, and using teams to perform Kaizen events has spread Lean knowledge to many employees who were not initially trained in using it.

The current process-oriented version of the county’s Lean program has been successful, but this is merely the basis for building the program ever higher. The county’s plans for the program are based on the following points:

- Continuous improvement and Lean are more than a methodology; in its ideal form, continuous improvement becomes a core value of the culture.
- We will not focus on attacking only the obvious or surface-level Lean opportunities.
- We will focus primarily on small, continuous, process-focused improvements.

**A CORE VALUE**

The county’s focus is shifting away from process and toward people. Since continuous improvement works best when it becomes a fundamental part of the organization — a core cultural value — the county is encouraging a new project based on the principles of the Toyota Motor Corporation’s A3 model. The central tenet of this approach will be employee ownership of Lean continuous improvement initiatives, and a primary goal will be cultivating “Instinctive Lean,” in which individuals identify areas of opportunity as they occur and address the root cause quickly and efficiently by using the A3 form.

The A3 report derives its name from the type of paper it was originally printed on, but it is really a run-through of the Plan-Do-Check-Act cycle for errors or abnormalities encountered in the course of day-to-day work. Rather than waiting for a Kaizen event, employees can use A3 to do something about problems, even small ones, right away. A3 report templates are easily available on the Internet, and they all have the following essential sections:

- **Plan.** Identify the problem and the background of the situation, and describe the current condition, identifying root causes, not just surface causes.
- **Do.** State the goal of the work and what is required to implement it — for instance, actions, the person responsible, and timelines.
- **Check.** The purpose of the Check portion is to ensure that the Do portion happens. The A3 form might outline the methods an employee can use, and the report should be updated periodically, as the Plan-Do-Check-Act cycle progresses.
- **Act.** Here, the lessons from the Check portion are acted on to improve the process. The A3 form asks the author to record what has been learned.

**GO DEEPER**

As we go through a working day, our focus often falls to the task at hand, especially in repetitive, task-based jobs. As a result, those surface issues are often the only ones the get corrected, whether through a formal Lean project or by just “putting out a fire.” A key factor in the success of Gwinnett County’s new approach will be developing a way to help employees see opportunities beyond the surface level. To help bring about this change in focus, the county’s Lean mentors must provide regular training and remain involved in the work of the team.

**LIMIT THE SCOPE**

The change in project structure is accompanied by a change in the scope of the county’s projects. Instead of focusing on complex, far-reaching processes, the primary focus will be on making small, incremental improvements in day-to-day processes. Advancing the Lean culture as the county wishes to do will greatly depend on momentum, and encouraging individuals to focus on incremental improvements to their normal work makes the idea of Lean seem less daunting and more beneficial.

**CONCLUSIONS**

Whether starting or improving a Lean program, success depends on changing thought patterns. The first step is the hardest, so organizations that want to pursue continuous improvement should start with one simple question: “Is this the best you can do?”

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