The City of Conroe, Texas

Lessons from a Lean Veteran

BY SHERRIE MATTSON
The Lean program in Conroe, Texas, has experienced victories, slowdowns, and revitalizations. The city has pursued Lean principles fairly aggressively, and this provides lessons learned and suggests ways to prepare for some of the obstacles that can develop in a Lean program. After all, it is good to learn from your own mistakes, but it is even better to learn from those of others.

CREATE A LEAN CULTURE

As with any strategic endeavor, senior and mid-level management are the models for those they manage. Lean thinking starts with the tone at the top and filters throughout the organization. In Conroe, the internal auditor worked with the process review teams, and training and support were initially provided by an outside consulting firm. Throughout the city, teams were trained in Lean methods and participated in process reviews for other departments so they would understand how Lean worked and be able to apply it in their own departments.

Managers sometimes agree to Lean concepts in theory, but not in practice, so the first step to real success with Lean is to make sure the yes you receive is a true buy-in. The managers who support Lean will be more than willing to have their processes reviewed by teams and take the time to complete the improvement ideas that result. Managers who have not fully grasped the benefits of Lean thinking will not participate in having processes reviewed, complete the tasks to make the recommended improvements, or provide adequate resources for their staff to participate in the Lean program. After a while, this behavior can create challenges in keeping the Lean momentum going.

Honest feedback is a major part of any Lean program. One way to get it is by educating both senior and mid-level managers about Lean thinking. Ensure that they receive adequate training to understand the concepts and benefits of maintaining Lean applications. After the plan has been provided, the vision explained, and training provided, ask for honest feedback. It can be easier to request three to five pros and cons about the Lean program, and if you suspect that your audience may hesitate to voice their reservations (perhaps because you have more formal or informal authority in the organization), try asking that the feedback be presented without names.

Good feedback doesn’t just help bring everyone on board; it can also shed light on weaknesses in the Lean program. The information you receive from your managers can be used to enhance the program or as an opportunity to provide additional explanation or training.

Also provide Lean training for all employees, not just management. This communicates that the Lean program is a part of every position throughout the organization, not an add-on or something only Lean team members need to worry about. The more people are a part of developing the process, the greater the ownership they will have in the program.

FRUIT-PICKING AND TREE-TRIMMING

Initial Lean process reviews seek to pick the low-hanging fruit. Immediate, visible results encourage participation, so the obvious corrections are a great place to start. Eventually, you will delve deeper into the process and move toward trimming the tree itself. Just as trees that are pruned at the right time will flourish and grow healthier than those left on their own, work processes need to be evaluated and trimmed down to eliminate unproductive steps and help the organization to grow and flourish.

Some of the corrections that will be identified in the initial process review will be the obvious areas of waste. It can be easy to identify situations in which one person duplicates time and effort to input information into a software program because the needed data is from another department that uses an incompatible program. Likewise, it is obvious that something needs to be done about processes that require customers to stand in line for undue amounts of time. Most people are supportive and understanding about correcting the obvious problems.

But what happens when the needed improvements are not so straightforward? Once the real pruning gets underway,
you will delve deeper into analyzing each step and its impact on the entire organization, not just the process. Answering the basic reporter questions of who, what, where, when, why, and how may become more uncomfortable. For example, acknowledging that wasted time and effort exists is easier than deciding which computer program to keep or eliminate in order to gain efficiencies and avoid duplication of effort. This decision moves the review beyond just the one process, expanding the decision tree to multiple branches and layers of activities in the organization. Each department purchased its software program to support its essential functions, and the Lean review will have to take that into account — in and of itself, and in relation to the overall process of one department, more than one department, and the entire organization. The review will also have to consider the relevance of the process to the department and to the organization.

The main person who owns the process will, by nature, be more protective of each step involved. If that individual sees the review as a personal attack instead of an effort for improvement, then the process review team faces a challenge in developing alternative methods. To help diffuse such a situation, demonstrate an understanding that there were good, logical reasons for structuring the process the way it was, and help this person understand that the best option in the past may no longer be the best for the present, much less the future. Teach the benefits of being Lean. Ask him or her to consider this question: “If you had more time or resources, what could you do that you can’t now?”

Identifying the source of a task and evaluating how that one process item relates to the overall organization can be difficult. Add to that the passion of the person who created that task and the importance that it has to them. Compound that by the fear of the employees who perform the task that their jobs may not be secure if the step or process is eliminated. Now weigh all of those issues against the general fear of change that many people have. For all these reasons, employees are not happy to be participating in a process that they perceive as threatening.

And there are times when pruning isn’t enough and the tree needs to be removed. In those cases, make sure that removing the process is truly the best option for the organization. The team that reviews a process to determine whether it should be eliminated must be sensitive to the effect this action will have on the individuals who are a part of the process. The impact of such a decision must be fully addressed, including weighing the effects on employee morale. You should be able to confidently present compelling reasons and benefits, demonstrating that you have thought through every positive and negative aspect of such a serious decision.

**BACKSLIDING**

The Lean program itself should be reviewed periodically to ensure that it is achieving the organization’s goals. A Lean program has a tendency to backslide over time if the focus and support are not constantly at the forefront. The following are some potential causes and consequences of backsliding; identifying these and similar pitfalls should result in recommendations for improvements.

When the documented savings start to diminish, it can be discouraging to recognize smaller savings. For example, your first review might save $100,000, but the one you just spent three days on only identifies $1,000 in savings. In a situation like this, it can be hard to motivate yourself to continue — you may not be as inclined to complete the tasks necessary to save that $1,000. After all, it appears that the labor costs of the team’s time to review the process already exceeded the identified savings.

In addition, hectic work schedules can take precedence over allocating time to complete the tasks necessary to reap the Lean savings. All levels of management need to support the Lean program and allocate time to making the necessary improvements. Should there be any staff shrinkage in the department responsible for performing the Lean task, this problem can be compounded.

Another time allocation challenge is employee turnover. A new supervisor or manager who is not familiar with the Lean
program may not identify the completion of Lean tasks as a primary objective. The employee who has been the frontrunner in completing the Lean tasks may no longer be employed in the department or organization, and the remaining tasks go unassigned.

Unsuccessful process reviews can dampen the spirits of the employees who were on the team. This can happen when those who are responsible for the process are not prepared and have not identified all the steps within the process, or are not open to improvement suggestions, or refuse to perform the tasks necessary to achieve the recommended process. Also, individual team members can become discouraged when their input is not respected by another person on the team.

When Lean improvements are vetoed by someone outside of the process review team, the team members can feel as though they wasted their time and effort. When this happens, it is sometimes because there wasn’t enough information available when the process was reviewed. Failing to identify the impact of a change on another process or department in the organization can also prevent a recommended task from being completed. And sometimes departments simply refuse to implement a task, without providing an explanation, which is also discouraging.

Similarly, perceived improvements do not always produce the desired effect. Sometimes the most logical recommendations do not work, perhaps because of external obstacles that are beyond the control of the team, department, or organization. In these cases, the process may need to be reviewed in further detail to identify alternative improvements.

Another issue is that employees assigned to the process review team might not be freed from their regular responsibilities and therefore find participation burdensome. Not only does this show disrespect for the individual employee’s time, but for the entire team and the process reviewed. Each interruption to the process review has the potential for breaking the momentum of the team’s interaction and brainstorming. When interruptions are allowed to take precedence, the team’s work starts to become an afterthought.

The next section presents several lessons the City of Conroe has learned that might be helpful in your organization’s consistent pursuit of Lean.

LESSONS LEARNED TO PREVENT BACKSLIDING

Backsliding is a real risk in Lean — continuous improvement can easily become continuous regression, if not managed properly. Following are some strategies to avoid backsliding.

The organization needs a written document that describes the Lean program and its purpose. This document should be designed to empower the designated leaders of the Lean initiative. Describe job functions and expectations and provide team members with guidance and authority regarding their responsibilities. The program should include methods of accountability so department managers understand the process and the expectations. Also include guidelines for regular reporting on the status of recommended tasks and the impact of the Lean ideas.

The organization’s budget should reflect the importance of the Lean program. Allocate appropriate monetary and time management resources for both reviewing processes and implementing Lean recommendations. When the teams identify hard-dollar savings, remove that money from the budget to encourage completion of all the tasks.
To help motivate staff and increase perseverance, make sure the entire organization receives regular reports on the aggregate savings from the Lean program. Not all improvements are going to equate to huge dollar amounts, but sometimes larger savings can only happen because of the smaller savings that precede them. Help employees see that their efforts are noticed and that the organization supports their regular attempts to improve quality through effectiveness and efficiency.

The Lean program itself should be reviewed periodically. Take the time to evaluate the effectiveness of the program and identify the causes of any delays. Prioritize tasks so their effects can be monitored as they are implemented. Develop surveys that provide good feedback on the program, and be open to improvement ideas.

Keep learning and teaching the Lean concepts throughout the organization. New people come in, and current employees forget. Surround your employees with Lean reminders to help keep them aware of Lean and help them remember that they need to look for ways they can do their jobs better and smarter every day. Guide employees in the mindset that change is good and stagnation isn’t.

CONCLUSIONS

The City of Conroe has learned a great deal from its Lean experience. Getting feedback on the Lean program is crucial to ensuring that everyone is invested in the program, and that it is not just a pet idea of one or a few people. Start out with the low-hanging fruit, but expect to eventually trim the tree, and to remove the tree, in certain cases. In addition, backsliding is a real risk with Lean programs, so be aware of the potential causes and consequences of lost momentum. Develop strategies to emphasize Lean and keep the focus on continuous improvement.

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