

Lean Beyond Manufacturing



“If people would only follow the process.....”

by Jean Cunningham

Companies use processes that work. After all they are receiving and filling orders, providing service every day, and getting paid for it. In fact, we often have kaizen attendees ask, “This process isn’t broken, so why are we doing this?” And, that’s correct, processes are not broken per se, but it does miss the reason you should be doing continuous process improvement. A broken process is readily recognizable since work will not get done, but what is often overlooked is the process that is full of waste—time eating, personnel depressing, bottom-line costly waste! The waste may have been inadvertently designed in or is a result of not following the process. So, the real question almost always is, “How can the process be improved?”

If you know of even one workaround in a process, it is a red-flag indicator that improvement is needed. Often workarounds have been improvised in isolation by the individual doing the process in order to complete a task, and no one else knows about it or the waste it might include. The odds of waste in a process under these circumstances are virtually 100%. A leader or supervisor will only see these red flags upon very close inspection.

One of our clients examined their order entry process at a recent kaizen event we facilitated. We found that a number of good order entry tools were being used, but the tools had not been reviewed or updated in over 14 years! Further, new people were not routinely trained on the tools, so many new employees learned just bits of the process as originally designed.

Like always, there were numerous waste elimination gains, but the biggest challenge for this company was a lack of compliance. In fact, in one part of the process, the first pass yield* was around 10%. A very low number that, sadly enough, is not abnormal in many processes before lean principles are first applied. So, were employees involved in order entry being belligerent and not following orders? No! For this order entry process, a sheet of instructions was provided to tell employees in the process what to do, but the instructions were (1) not in their “language”—hard to understand and not specific—and (2) it did not include what to do if the work did not fit in the process.

By adding a simple visual—a flow diagram—to the reverse side of the process instruction sheet that included blocks that addressed all situations, the client was able to resolve most of the issues that had been identified. Indeed, a picture is often worth a thousand words.

Without the thorough examination that a kaizen event provides, non-compliance could easily be assumed to be the fault of employees, management, or both. But, rather than focusing on the false assumption of “bad” employees that do not follow a process, focus on improving the process and communication to make it understandable and easier to follow!

*first pass yield = The percentage of cycles when all information for the process is available and the process can be completely correctly the first time.