

Is Lean for the Office Different than Continuous Improvement?

By Jean Cunningham

You would not be alone if you think, “We already do continuous improvement; why should I introduce lean into non-manufacturing areas?” What makes lean different and of higher value than other types of continuous improvements activities for the office?

Every company I have worked at always had a focus on continuous improvement...either as a program (Six Sigma, Quality Circles, etc) or with “management by objectives”. But, I have found that while lean certainly includes continuous improvement elements, there are some lean-specific characteristics that by their very nature tend to drive process improvement to an entire new level not seen with quality programs. One of these is the initial kaizen activity of de-constructing an entire process in detail to establish the current state by those who perform the process plus some outsiders who do not have pre-existing blinders. The improvements often start even before the future state is established. As participants create every minute step of their role in the process, the greater process materializes before their eyes. They see steps and relationships that have been under their nose for years, but are just not noticed in the day-to-day job interactions. And, improvements become obvious, and, then, there might be a shout-out, “Why are you doing that when I could just do this a little different or not at all, and, then, you wouldn’t have to do that!” AND, improvement spontaneously occurs, participants are feeling empowered, and away you go...

Improvements in the office environment are orchestrated using the same lean principles and techniques used in lean manufacturing. At a recent kaizen event I facilitated related to the monthly financial closing the books, a few of the improvements were:

Voice of the Customer: Over half of the participants in this kaizen event were customers of the financial statements. By their engagement, the accountants were able to hear directly what information was useful, the level of precision needed, the importance of quick versus precise, and where more information was needed.

One Piece Flow/Reduce Batch Size: Each of the major feeds came into the general ledger once a month. By reducing the batch size to weekly or daily, the information was more available to review for defects weekly, as well as creating the possibility of meeting the customer need of more timely information.

Visual Management/Andon: A visual board was created for each closing task to show if the task was going to be completed on time.

These are just a few of the examples of how we borrow from lean in the factory concepts and apply them to the office. By reducing waste, each of these will (1) save time, (2) raise understanding, (3) enable better decisions quicker, (4) inspire, (5) reduce work, or (5) all of the above.

So, next time you hear someone say “Lean is just for manufacturing.”, why don’t you share some examples of how you have used Lean Beyond Manufacturing.