Lean Healthcare

Creating a Lean-thinking culture

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Healthcare is complicated, but caring is ultimately simple.

For years, companies in all sectors have used Lean tools to simplify and streamline manufacturing and business processes. Now, hospitals are successfully applying those same basic tools to increase efficiency, improve employee engagement and enhance financial performance. Yet, sustainable performance with Lean requires more than just the application of the tools. It requires a shift in thinking. Organizations need to embrace Lean as an operating philosophy supported by leadership and enabled by aligned activities.

To be successful, a Lean framework must include: leaders who embrace the Lean philosophy and build accountability for sustainable improvement in key value streams; a dedication to developing Lean talent competent in the Lean tools; and supporting infrastructure that drives alignment of projects and maximizes their impact (Figure 1).

Prepare leadership.

Leadership plays a significant role in cultural transformation. Leaders must create the vision, then energize and enable the organization to achieve it. Effective leadership training led by trained facilitators helps your leaders position your Lean strategy for success.

An initial working session where senior leaders reflect on their strategic goals and learn where Lean fits into their organization’s overall strategy starts to build the necessary infrastructure. Facilitators help you develop your organization’s design for Lean deployment, which aligns and defines executive-level ownership and accountability, identifies how many and which people to train for critical roles, and outlines a communication plan for the initiative.

Additional workshops are needed to give senior leaders, directors and managers a high-level overview of key Lean concepts and how to apply them in a healthcare environment. These sessions also introduce change management tools and determine how best to leverage them to support the multiple process changes that will occur. A final session helps leaders at all levels understand their roles as sponsors, and the leadership behaviors they must employ in a Lean-thinking, empowered culture.

Create the infrastructure.

Some 62 percent of initiatives that fail do so for lack of leadership commitment and oversight. Experience shows that large-scale deployments require precise coordination and a common “cadence” to advance smoothly. A Program Management Office (PMO) enables this coordination and demonstrates long-term leadership commitment.

The overriding objective of the PMO (Figure 2) is to translate your hospital’s strategy into a tactical process improvement plan that guides value stream selection project prioritization and oversees program management activities to ensure appropriate leadership focus, strategic alignment and timely execution of all process improvement activities.

Lean experts provide mentoring and support throughout your Lean deployment, helping you build and sustain the support structures you need for success.
Once the process has been stabilized, the teams are ready to apply more advanced Lean concepts. The natural next step is to standardize the work that is done to reduce processing variation and improve process flow.

It is then possible with standardized processes to manipulate the key components to level load or resequence the work schedule to eliminate bottlenecks and establish flow necessary to increase throughput and staff productivity.

And now that the processes are stable, standardized and sequenced advanced Lean concepts related to the just-in-time-and built-in-quality process can be applied. Just in time introduces inventory management concepts related to consumption-based replenishment designed to reduce inventory costs as well as prevent stockouts of key supplies. Built-in quality error-proofs processes so mistakes cannot be made, keeping your patients safe and your staff less frustrated.

The capstone to a complete House of Lean is the ability to realize the full impact of a continuous cycle of improvement in terms of patient experience, culture change and return on investment.

Build competency.

Deploying Lean is not for amateurs. Just as it takes time and dedication for a runner to get ready for a marathon, preparation for Lean deployment starts months in advance. It takes physical training, mental preparation, a progressive program of skill advancement and overarching support from sponsors.

Before starting a broad-based education program, it is important to understand the current state of the work processes within your key value streams. A value stream is a series of activities that chains together to create a product or service for the customer — in this case, patients. The object is to optimize activities that add value and eliminate those that do not. An example of a key value stream is the emergency department process from the time a patient enters through triage, treatment, and admission or discharge. By understanding your processes as they exist today, you can initiate your education program at the appropriate levels. The Healthcare House of Lean (Figure 3) gives insight on how to apply Lean principles as your processes mature.

For example: Before teams can effectively evaluate a process, they must establish a basic understanding of how the process is working and what it is expected to do. Often, Lean teams will find the physical environment is too chaotic to support an efficient process or even observation-based evaluation. In that case, the first phase of Lean work will be focused on stabilizing the physical environment in preparation for effective evaluation and analysis.
The standardized system (the fourth S) becomes the basis for Lean continuous improvement. It introduces the work teams to visual management, production control and standardized work processes (Figure 6). The interaction of the team members will also change as they work to implement the 5S system in their workspaces. The most desirable change is a shift to an action-oriented, empowered team that readily embraces change and engages in process ownership.

Once you regain control of the workplace, you are ready to progress through the Healthcare House of Lean with in-depth training and hands-on experiences mentored by Lean experts. The best programs develop competency in a targeted group of people — the Lean leaders — to carry your organization through the Lean marathon. These people must be dedicated full time to Lean implementation. In the initial executive working session, your leaders will have learned the criteria for selecting people for this key transformational role.

Establish your base with 5S.
Additive education paces your organization’s learning and Lean application to your work processes, some of which are more mature than others. Lean experts help you reach the first level of the Healthcare House of Lean through practical training in a 5S system (Figure 4). A 5S system helps you create a visual workplace that enables the inherent process issues or abnormalities to surface. 5S is a hands-on, structured approach that is applied at the working level and can be ramped up quickly. It helps front-line staff and managers apply the new methods immediately and directly to their day-to-day work.

The first three S’s in 5S take cluttered and chaotic workplaces and make them highly organized (Figure 5). By regaining control of the workplace in these foundational steps, your organization will start to experience the benefits of eliminating the waste associated with searching for materials. Other benefits may include better material control and less point-of-use inventory.
Effective education for Lean leaders is designed to develop competencies in: process observation techniques, process analysis using Lean methods, current-state and future-state value stream mapping, opportunity analysis, and prioritization. Trainers also teach them how to facilitate rapid cycle improvement events known as Kaizens and how to anticipate and respond to cultural resistance when it occurs in the change process — as it very often will.

Starting the journey.
Creating a Lean-thinking culture requires a long-term commitment from leadership, purposeful alignment to your strategic vision and talented resources. Without it, your marathon runners may pull up short and fail to achieve your ultimate goals. You also need a clear strategy for creating a change-oriented culture of people ready to work alongside the Lean leaders to improve delivery of patient care.

Every healthcare organization starts the Lean journey from a different place. It is up to your leaders to understand your starting point — how many miles and at what pace you wish to run the marathon. However you choose to proceed, there is little doubt the time to act is now.
Authors

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