6 Lean Principles to support efficiency

Most processes don't start out this way, but over time, small changes occur and workarounds are developed rather than going through a complete overhaul. Sometimes work is pieced together out of necessity and nobody really gives it any strategic thought or considers how it will affect the big picture. Usually this isn't a problem because people adapt their ways of working to compensate for an inefficient process.

The problems occur when an employee leaves and takes that knowledge with them or a new employee is hired and needs to be trained on all the exceptions and workarounds.

When a process is difficult and requires a lot of mental concentration, we are also prone to making more mistakes and errors when we are tired, overworked, or otherwise not functioning at our best. In some jobs, this is a critical flaw in terms of risks and outcomes.

This presents an opportunity for process improvement using lean principles. The lean philosophy emphasises creating more value for customers with fewer resources through optimising the "flow of work". The outcomes of doing this might be:

- a more organised state of operation where employees have access to tools they need
- excellent customer service
- cost savings are realised due to efficient processes and workflows, and all this leads to profitable business results.

Implementing lean process improvement can become quite involved and detailed. However, the basic principles are simple and straightforward and can be applied informally by any team to start discussions and identify improvements:

1. **Focus on your customers**

Value creation occurs when the quality of services received is perceived as high compared to their cost. What does your customer want and how can you provide it better, faster, cheaper?

2. **Consider out how the work gets done.**

We have lots of assumptions about how work gets done that don't mirror exactly what happens. After all, during the day-to-day grind, we don't think about how we do the work, we often just do it. Ask an outside observer to record the steps of the process in a way that he/she could repeat it themselves if they had to, without assistance.

3. Remove inefficiencies and waste.

Once you know what the workflow of your process looks like, take a second look at any step in the process that doesn't directly create value for the customer. Manage, improve, and smooth your process flow to eliminate non-valued-added activity (e.g., wasted time, wasted movement, wasted inventory due to overproduction, customer delays, waiting for approvals, delays due to batching of work, unnecessary steps, duplication of effort, and errors and rework).

4. Track numbers and manage by evidence.

Sometimes what should work well doesn't. Test out your process, collect data on how well it is working, highlight and eliminate errors, and seek continuous improvements in value. Seek proof; don't assume an improvement has been made.

5. Empower the people operating the process.

The best person to improve a process is the person who carries out the process. Utilise employee's full skillsets: could someone be doing more? If the process is improved, they will likely have time to take on higher level work.

6. Go about all this in a systematic way.

Your process is not perfect and if by some miracle it is, it won't stay that way for long. Changes will occur that will demand changes in the process. Being able to replicate the steps of process improvements is the key to delivering long-term, sustained value.

If they are complicated, take time to map them out: use post it notes on a wall with colleagues to identify where things could be process mapped.