

Lean Is At Work... From the Factory Floor to the Operating Room



By Charles Hagood

Are you like many other Lean practitioners in that you considered the term "Lean Enterprise" to only be applicable to the manufacturing giants of industry? Well think again! Lean, first created as a part of the Toyota Production System (TPS), is an operational approach and methodology embraced by world-class companies throughout the world. With proven results Lean is now making its way into non-manufacturing industries such as insurance, banking, and the healthcare industry.

The manufacturing industry had many skeptics in the late 1980's and early 1990's who initially thought Lean would be just another buzzword or management fad by joining such flashes in the pan as TQM and Re-engineering. A decade later these proven Lean principles have not only survived, but many now consider Lean a requirement for survival in the cost conscious and cut-throat world of manufacturing. This is partially because Lean organizations are vigilant in identifying waste within their value streams (the complete flow of a service from the customers perspective) and processes. They are relentless in their applications of eliminating or drastically reducing waste that adds no value to the customer experience. Lean, which ultimately permeates all that an organization does, is now being applied with resounding success to the healthcare industry and is simply called "LeanHealthcare." LeanHealthcare is a term that is still foreign to many in an industry that is fraught with skyrocketing costs, poor patient (customer) and caregiver (employee) satisfaction, complex and cumbersome I.T. solutions, nursing shortages, physician frustration, and malpractice cases resulting from inadvertent errors and oversights. The basic principles of Lean are tailor made for the healthcare industry, which is made up of many "manufacturing like" processes but has always struggled to evaluate those same processes like the 'metal bending industrial sector'.

One reason the Lean practice is somewhat foreign to many in healthcare is apparent to experienced Lean practitioners. Many other industries have attempted to drastically improve their processes with increased automation and software alone. I have observed some in the healthcare industry are following the same path today. Many of the necessary tasks required in today's healthcare sector are inefficient if not impossible without a solid I.T platform, but despite the importance of such systems they cannot be looked to as a cure for all the operational issues that plague this industry. Recently one of our client organizations had a goal to decrease their turnover time in the Operating Room (OR). Through the use of LeanHealthcare tools, waste, idle time and efforts that added no value from the Patients or Physicians perspective were eliminated. Additionally, Visual

Indicators were put in place to help reduce errors and rework. The Team was able to reduce the turnover time immediately by 50%. This was achieved with minimal investment and without any changes to the hospital or departmental IT systems.

In a Lean organization, processes and "value streams" associated with services, products, and patient care are continually evaluated for waste. Such waste is then attacked with a vengeance using a number of industry proven methods. Tools such as:

- Pull Systems and "flow" to improve throughput in areas such as labs and other paperwork intensive processes
- SMED techniques applied for changeover time improvements in operating rooms
- Mistake proofing (Poka-Yoke) tools applied to reduce the opportunity for errors and omissions
- 5S (workplace organization) applied to workplace and nursing stations for efficiency improvements, plus many other Lean tools to reduce waste.

Lean isn't intended to target changes in the clinical medical procedure or nursing care. Lean also isn't intended to eliminate people and employees. Lean is only seeking to eliminate waste in all those tasks and processes that provide no value with an ultimate goal that more time can be dedicated to patient care, which in Lean terms is "Value-Added" in the eyes of the customer (patient).

While Lean isn't the solution for every problem faced today in healthcare, or any other industry for that matter, it can certainly make some dramatic improvements that provide sustainable, positive, and employee embraced change. Whether a clinician or a patient, many agree that such improvements are needed in order to contribute to Physician, Patient and Employee satisfaction.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

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