

Work Smarter, Not Harder: A Case Study on Lean Design in San Mateo County Human Services Agency

REGINA DE MELO

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Lean Design is a broad framework and set of planning and facilitation tools that support organizations to look at their processes and work flow with the ultimate goals of customer satisfaction, quality, and efficiency in mind. While Lean Design was originally created to support manufacturing work, it has been well-adapted over time to address processes in the health and human services sector. In this venue, it has helped public organizations reshape processes and practices once deemed arduous and bureaucratic to more streamlined, less complex, and more client-oriented practices that have provided multiple benefits to organizations and clients. Lean Design also creates an environment where the employees who

work directly with the processes are empowered to identify and promote alternative solutions based on their unique expertise. Using Lean Design principles, these solutions are piloted and results measured. Successful pilots lead to larger-scaled implementation, greater organizational efficiencies, and more engaged employees.

In San Mateo County, the Human Services Agency formally adopted a structure for Lean Design in 2015. They actively use Lean Design thinking in their view of existing processes. The organization has reshaped a variety of processes in each of their divisions and has seen positive results in client services and employee engagement.

**Regina de Melo, Program Development Manager,
Sonoma County Human Services Department**

Work Smarter, Not Harder: A Case Study on Lean Design in San Mateo County Human Services Agency

REGINA DE MELO

Introduction

Public service organizations strive to build work processes that are efficient, effective, and serve clients and the community to the highest possible standard. Often, over time, and with natural changes in staffing, leadership, and regulations, these work processes become more complex, complicated, and time-consuming. Organizations must periodically revisit processes with a new perspective, but leadership staff often do not find the time to do this, and so existing processes continue on. Lean Design is a structure for revisiting processes that allows staff who are close to the work to evaluate their own workflow, re-think processes with a focus on serving the client, propose efficiencies, and test new ideas through time-limited pilots that can be scaled to full implementation.

The Lean Design Framework

The Lean Design framework provides a structure for (1) incrementally finding and evaluating issues in processes; (2) identifying possible solutions; and (3) testing those solutions through pilots. Lean Design brings stakeholders at all levels of an organization in to first agree upon a client-centered goal, then identify the most efficient route to meet that goal. Lean Design is also about driving problem-solving to the lowest level of the organization, since staff who are directly involved in the process have the best understanding of root causes of issues and how to fix them. Direct service and supervisory staff with knowledge of the process participate in several facilitated meetings over a series of weeks. During those meetings, the group engages in practical,

hands-on, and creative problem solving, then develops recommendations with measurements of success. Managers do not participate in the facilitated meetings, but review the group's recommendations and initiate pilots of the ideas. By piloting small and fast ideas and using agreed-upon measures of success, ideas are vetted quickly and objectively by reviewing the attainment of the agreed upon outcomes.

Key Ideas in Lean Design

Several components of Lean Design thinking are:

- **Asking the “5 Whys” or Root Cause Analysis:** This concept is simply asking why a problem exists. By continuing to ask why there is an issue or why something needs to be done a certain way, then continuing to ask why that is done and so on, the discussion moves to the root issues of undue process complexities, rather than just the symptoms of them.
- **Value Stream:** Value Stream is a term for using process mapping focused on the end result—what will provide the best service to the customer—as the guide for what drives the most efficient and effective process. Looking at processes through only that lens, rather than through the lens of other variables, like which staff member has the capacity to do it, which would be most willing to do it, which are doing other similar things, et cetera, drives thinking towards efficiency and the end goal, and creates better processes.
- **PICK (Possible, Implement, Challenge, Kibosh) Chart:** A PICK Chart is a visual tool

used during brainstorming new processes that demonstrates the exchange between the difficulty and impact of ideas. As ideas are generated, they range from Low Impact and Low Difficulty to High Impact and High Difficulty. By plotting ideas in this way, participants can more easily identify which ideas can be most quickly implemented, as well as which would be most effective.

- **Using Pilots in a Structured Way:** Pilots are a critical component of Lean Design planning. Towards the end of Lean Design planning, the group conceptualizes pilots of the favored ideas for process improvements. Structure, duration, and measurement of pilots are designed by the Lean Design Team. These ideas are then vetted by the Section Manager(s) and given the go-ahead for implementation by the Area Supervisor. The effectiveness of the pilots is determined by the attainment of the already agreed upon performance measures. This concept allows the staff closest to the problem (and on the Lean Design Team) to identify and test possible solutions quickly. By having the outcomes agreed upon in advance, all parties are clear on what success (and therefore full implementation) must look like. Pilots need to be very adaptable; if it is working well, other groups may become involved, expanding the pilot. Conversely, if it is not working, it can end at any time.
- **Measuring performance:** Every Lean Design process addresses how improved processes will be measured. In the later stages of the group work, pilots are agreed upon and measures for the success of those pilots are defined. The group agrees that the pilot will only be considered successful (and therefore implemented) if those measures of success are achieved.

Case Study

Since 2015, San Mateo County Health System and San Mateo Human Services Agency (HSA) have focused time and resources on developing a new structure to review existing processes and develop

new processes using the Lean Design framework. With the support of contracted consultants, HSA leadership has provided extensive staff training and created a Lean Design Team, comprised of twenty Lean Champions. Lean Champions are interested staff members from every level of the organization. Koné Consulting, the contracted provider, has specific expertise in applying Lean Design principles within complex Human Services organizations. Koné built capacity by leading Lean Champions through several major process revamps using Lean Design tools over a two-year contract period. Prior to the contract ending, a .5 FTE Leadership Staff member with a background in staff development, facilitation, and mediation was extensively trained on Lean Design. She is continuing to implement Lean Design process mapping and workflow changes as the Lean Design Facilitator and Coach. A Lean Design Facilitator is not a project manager; she works as a neutral person to lead and structure the discussions, while the Section Manager is the project manager and oversees the implementation of the changes.

In San Mateo County HSA, Lean Design has been used to facilitate more than twenty process improvements. These improvements have spanned from changes to internal operations, to significant process improvements that affect thousands of individuals served by the agency. A potential Lean Design project is either formally or informally brought to the attention of the Lean Design team. It may be a system or process that needs improvement, an overly complex process that is creating poor customer experiences, avoidable workload, an issue challenging staff morale, or new legislation requiring a brand-new process to address a new requirement. Prior to facilitating the Lean Design meetings, the Lean Design Facilitator meets first with the Section Manager responsible for the process and who will serve as the project manager. The Manager and the Facilitator determine any non-negotiables that cannot be changed, as well as their goals for the process improvement. The Facilitator works with the Leadership team of that area to identify the team to begin the process mapping work. Half of the team are

those that do the work within the existing process while the other half are those who work adjacent to the process. No management or supervisory staff participate in these meetings so that more candid discussions can take place. As the process mapping begins, the Facilitator affirms that the group is there to develop agreements based upon what is best for the client. The Facilitator must ensure that the group sets aside workload concerns, “turf issues” or other complicating factors that get in the way of the end goal. The group works together to capture the current process, often capturing variances in the process (people seeing the work being done different ways by different individuals). This same group then creates a new map of what the process could look like in the future. The group then looks at the difference between the two maps to see where opportunities for improvement exist. They create recommended process improvements with measurements of success that may be implemented through pilots. This complete process takes several two-to-three-hour meetings over the course of a few weeks.

Members of the Management team with oversight to this process participate and provide feedback to the work of the Lean Design Team periodically through debrief sessions. At the conclusion of the meetings, Management staff review the recommendations with the Facilitator for pilot projects to test the new ideas. One or more ideas are piloted by a small group of staff, results are then measured, and decisions are made about whether to scale implementation to a larger group.

Impact

Lean Design has made a significant impact on services in San Mateo. Some examples include:

- In 2015, the CalFresh approval process had fifty-eight steps between the client first requesting CalFresh application to the actual approval and disbursement of benefit. Through Lean Design process mapping, the new planned process involves only eight steps. The client impact, measured through a client satisfaction survey and volume of approvals processed, has been positive.
- In child welfare, a process existed to provide transportation for foster youth to school, therapy, et cetera. A form was used to initiate the request, track the important details and approvals, and relay information to the transportation company. Over time, that form got more and more complicated and required more and more people to complete and review it, prior to getting to the transportation company. This caused major delays in starting transportation for the youth. The Lean Design team brought together ten people from different departments that touched this form. The group reviewed the process and ultimately made the determination that transport could be arranged through one communication between the requestor and the transport company.
- At the implementation of the Affordable Care Act, the agency had a backlog of 42,000 cases. Lean Design was used to create process improvements. The agency went from a rate of 71% of applications processed in a timely manner in 2015 to a rate of 91% in 2017. The agency surpassed the state benchmark and effectively provided health care coverage to 82,000 individuals.
- Economic Self Sufficiency staff used Lean Design to implement First Contact Resolution related to CalFresh and Medi-Cal. Previously, the work was structured as task-based and staff were evaluated based on the number of tasks completed. The organization moved to a case-based structure and realigned renewal dates for Medi-Cal and CalFresh so that multiple tasks could be done and clients could get more services in a single visit.
- The original process for keeping CARE client satisfaction surveys stocked at five satellite offices involved multiple, detailed steps that had to be completed by multiple staff members. Through an informal Lean Design discussion, the process was reviewed, issues identified,

and improvements made by allowing universal online access to the source documents tailored to each site.

Measuring results is an important component of Lean Design. In San Mateo County HSA, performance data for Lean Design has been gathered by division level and department reporting staff using data from CalWIN, Exemplar, SafeMeasures, their internal phone system, Q-Matic lobby management system, and pilot studies. The most commonly used measurement has been timeliness of completion of tasks, a measure commonly used by state and federal regulatory entities as well. Baseline metrics are established using existing performance measures that are used to manage workflow. At the beginning of any process improvement event, the workgroup identifies the target measurements that they intend to monitor in order to demonstrate improvement by a certain time frame. If improvement is evident in the performance data, the new process is scaled and fully adopted.

While it is difficult to financially quantify the benefits of the implementation of Lean Design in San Mateo County, staff at different levels share that there have been distinct qualitative benefits. These include improved customer experiences (documented in client surveys of Economic Self-Sufficiency clients), increased sense of staff empowerment in decision-making, and process changes and workload efficiencies that allow staff to process a much higher volume of applications and in a much more timely fashion. Savings can also be calculated on staff time gained. A process improvement that saves staff time can be quantified over time and that data can be part of the measured outcomes from the pilot project.

Recommendations

Implementing Lean Design strategies would be beneficial at Sonoma County Human Services Department (HSD) for several reasons. When staffing, regulations, or client priorities change, leadership teams throughout the Department often need to

address increased needs with the same amount of staff. Additionally, if staff do not look at new possibilities for changing processes, they are not making the best use of available technology. Some of HSD's Divisions still have a few processes tracked on colored notecards or papers that move from one inbox to the next, and the next; these processes could be looked at with an eye for the end product and a new set of technological tools in order to make the work more efficient.

Sonoma County Human Services values employee engagement in processes and decision-making because it boosts morale, retention and quality. At its core, Lean Design is based on problem solving done by employees at all levels, especially the level where the work is being done. Lean Design provides a structure to empower staff to identify solutions to process problems, discuss them in a facilitated setting, and try them out in a neutral, outcomes-oriented way. This structure can be applied in anywhere in HSD, and can be applied to both simple and complex processes. Several potential areas for process improvements have been identified at Family, Youth and Children, including responding to and documenting the work of Emergency Response referral investigations, coordination and decision-making around placement of children in foster care, and coordination of Team Decision Making (TEAM/TDM) meetings with a focus on engaging the client's support network.

The Lean Design framework can be implemented in a number of ways and would result in a variety of systemic improvements. Several different options of implementation of Lean Design include:

- **Option 1:** Create a .5 FTE Management level position within HSD, possibly Staff Development or Planning, Research, Evaluation and Engagement (PREE) to lead and facilitate Lean Design strategies throughout the Department. The position could provide training and support to HSD staff related to Lean Design and facilitate, coach, and provide ongoing support to five to ten Lean Design process implementations each year.

Additional support from the PREE team would be necessary to measure outcomes of process improvements. A two-year contract with a Lean Design consultant group would be key to training this staff member as well as other key participants for the first two years. Lean Design could also be integrated into the ELT curriculum as another means to build sustainability and integration into the HSD culture. The total contract cost for 36 days per year of Lean Design training is estimated at \$108,000 per year (\$3,000 per training day) and the .5 FTE Analyst position would cost approximately \$78,000 per year, not including overhead costs.

- **Option 2:** Recruit a group of ten to twelve Lean Design 'Champions' from HSD administration and the Divisions. Each Champion could commit to facilitating one to two Lean Design processes within the scope of their work annually. These Champions would receive training and hands-on experience from the consulting group as well as guidance through coaching the implementation of at least one process. Staff at all levels could be Lean Champions if interested and approved by the Division Director or assigned manager in order to build capacity throughout the organization. Projects would be of varying sizes and impact levels. The total contract cost for the consultant would be \$108,000 annually for 36 training days per year for a one-to-two-year period. Success of the implementation would be measured and evaluated to determine whether Lean Design is a sustainable improvement within the Department.
- **Option 3:** Family, Youth and Children's (FYC) Administrative Management team is interested in implementing Lean Design practices within the Division. A consultant group could be contracted to work closely with this team over an eighteen-month period. Three processes would be identified related to three core areas of FYC business—TEAM/TDM Meetings, Emergency Response Investigations, and Placement

Processes. With training and support from the contracted consultants, Administrative Management staff would facilitate process mapping informed by Lean Design principles. Existing processes in these three areas are currently under review, and Lean Design would provide a structure for the planning process. Estimated cost for 24 days of training at \$3,000 per day would be \$72,000 over an eighteen-month period. With this level of training, Administrative Management staff would be able to facilitate these three processes and sustain Lean Design practices in future process planning.

Communication with all staff about these process changes is critical and would need to be considered as part of the commitment to implementing Lean Design. Training on Lean Design should begin with the Management and Leadership teams throughout the Department, followed by training for all direct service staff interested in engaging in the process improvements. Leadership must be bought in to the Lean Design concept and willing to prioritize implementation of the pilot ideas that come from Lean Design planning. Lean Champions need to have the knowledge and leadership ability, and management support, to be able to question existing processes, even when those processes might have heavy management level investment. Lean Design is a structure for challenging the status quo in a neutral way, with the interest of internal and external customer needs and simplicity and efficiency in mind.

Lean Design process mapping focuses process planning on the end result—the outputs and customer satisfaction. When looking at a process through that lens, planners are able to remove barriers that create unnecessary steps or other inefficiencies to be able to separate how things are always done from what is being achieved. In today's environment of competing priorities, increased needs and limited resources, Lean Design can help ensure that resources are maximized.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Karlee Dickman and Clarisa Simon for supporting my research for this case study in San Mateo County. Karlee spent many hours discussing Lean Design with me and her passion and commitment for the process emanated through our discussions. I would also like to thank Fran Conner for discussing the feasibility of locally implementing Lean Design with me. Thank you as well to Alicia Koné for discussing Lean Design and the services that Koné consulting offers. I would also like to thank Charity Doronila, Nick Honey, and Karen Fies for providing the time and resources to allow me to attend the BASSC Program.

References

- Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. *Improving Care Delivery through Lean: Implementation Case Studies*. Published November 2014. Accessed.
- George, Michael L. *Lean Six Sigma for Service*. McGraw-Hill. 2003.
- Koné, Alicia, President, Koné Consulting. Personal Interview. 6 April 2018.
- UC Davis Extension and the Center for Human Services. *Lean Six Sigma Training Manual for the County of Sonoma Health and Human Services Agency*. August 25, 2011.