

Lean Six Sigma For Good

Lessons from the Gemba

Real-life stories and experiences written by Lean and Six Sigma
volunteers working with not-for-profit organizations



Volume 2

Douglas Cooper: Standard Work and Finding the Foundation for Lean Management Practices in Liberia

Liberia, one of 54 countries on the continent of Africa, is located about 3 degrees north of the equator, in the lower corner of the great bulge into the Atlantic Ocean that defines West Africa. The country is roughly the size of Ohio, with a population of about 4.5 million citizens, and the 8th lowest gross domestic product (GPD) per capita in the world.⁷ From late 2015 to early 2018, I worked in Liberia for Mercy Corps, a large US-based INGO (international non-governmental organization) during the last half of the West African Ebola crisis. In late 2017, the country also had national elections and its first peaceful transition of power to a new political party in its history. It was an intense learning experience on many levels, and underlined the value and applicability of lean process management practices even in very chaotic, extreme environments.

⁷GDP per capita, [factbook/fields/211rank.html#LI](https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/fields/211rank.html#LI)

<https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/fields/211rank.html#LI>

The Context of the Work



Map of Africa, with Liberia highlighted

Liberia is one of two countries on the African continent that was never colonized by a Western or European power. Its modern political boundaries encompass the traditional lands of 15 tribes, with overlapping relationships in Sierra Leone, Guinea, and Cote d'Ivoire. The modern country of Liberia began with the emigration of former slaves from the United States and West Indies sponsored

by the American Colonization Society of Philadelphia in the second half of the 19th century. After several decades of limited success, illness and conflict with indigenous tribes, the Americos, as the new inhabitants were named by native peoples, finally gained a toehold in this new environment. Within several decades, they had recreated the social and economic structure of antebellum South with themselves as plantation owners and local tribespeople as laborers. Economic power quickly coalesced in the Americos and became synonymous with the Whig political party, which held power in the nominally democratic state for nearly a century. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, Liberia was considered a rising star on the African continent. Its economy was beginning to find traction in the emerging international marketplace, and its beautiful coastline became the site of several five star resorts and increasing tourist trade. That was until a political coup in 1980 and the 13 year civil war that soon followed broke open long repressed social and economic tensions, destroyed the country's infrastructure and fractured its civil life. Liberia has yet to recover.

West African and UN peacekeeping forces intervened and ended the fighting in 2003, and in 2005 Liberia elected Helen Johnson Sirleaf as the continent's first female president. The country began its slow recovery from devastation of the long civil war.

The West African Ebola outbreak, which began in late 2013, added to the country's challenges and reversed the fragile momentum that the country was beginning to build. The virus was first identified in western Guinea and northeastern Liberia. It quickly spread to Sierra Leone, and soon engulfed these three countries in a horrific health crisis that killed over 11,000 people. In August 2014, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared an international public health emergency. Fearing an uncontrollable pandemic, quarantines were established and internal and international trade stopped. Most international flights were curtailed, and the economic growth rate soon went negative, bringing additional hardship, distress and increased poverty to many Liberians.

Although international health agencies were criticized for not engaging effectively in the early stages of the contagion, the international response to Ebola was substantial. Major national and institutional donors like USAID, The World Bank, the European Union, along with many other funders, poured resources into the country. In Liberia, the US military built Ebola Response Clinics around the country and provided logistical support. There were countless stories of bravery and self-sacrifice as Liberians helped their fellow citizens deal with the terror and effects of the pandemic. By mid 2015, the crisis appeared to be under control, although it was still taking its toll on new victims, and the country's welfare in general. There were also many unintended consequences that accompanied the flood of aid, Ebola relief activities and INGOs engaged in humanitarian response work in the country. Prices and salaries skyrocketed, exacerbating the income inequalities within communities. There was a shortage of experienced Liberian nationals to fill the roles in the many emergency response programs. People with thin qualifications and little experience were often hired and promoted quickly within international organizations to fill gaps in program work. Everyone was doing the best they could in difficult circumstances, but there was an inherent level of chaos that accompanied the massive international response as it encountered the meager infrastructure, lack of local expertise, endemic corruption and a struggling national government. This was the context of the work that I undertook in the fall of 2015.

Our Programs and Challenges

Mercy Corps had been operating in Liberia since 2002 and by late 2015 when I arrived it was well established as a reliable, effective partner with local communities, civil sector partners and government ministries. The internal organization of our county office in Monrovia, the capital, was typical of an INGO.

The ongoing daily work of our programs and their successful

completion relied on the function of three teams:

1. Operations, which managed the procurement of materials and services, logistics of vehicles and drivers and infrastructure of the main office, utilities and communications.
2. Finance, which provided the flow of funds for program activities, oversaw compliance with donor requirements and internal controls, financial management and records and
3. Programs, the staff who were doing the actual work, usually in the communities, that was defined in the grant or contract with the funder. (Overall administration and human resources, while important, supported these teams and their daily work of program implementation.)

In 2015, things were not going well for many reasons. There was rapid growth in the size and number of active programs, budgets and staff. There were the stresses of high-pressure, fast paced implementation of emergency response programs, AND the social and emotional disruptions engendered by the Ebola crisis. Our country director was overworked, stretched too thin, and had not had the level of administrative support warranted by the size of the program portfolio and level of activity. There were backlogs in procurement slowing program implementation, and shortages of drivers and vehicles to get staff to the work in the field. Vendors were slow to get paid, and new contracts needed to accomplish program objectives were tortuously slow to negotiate and finalize. Tensions were running high in the organization, and struggles to complete work (while wresting with multiple challenges) often spilled over in frustrations and blame of other teams and leadership. Trust and communications had broken down, and performance at all levels was paying the price.

In my initial role as Director of Programs for the Liberia country office, I was responsible for the implementation and successful completion of our programs. Because of past experience with lean

process management, I was inclined to see the challenges in front of me through that lens. I had implemented lean process systems as a manufacturing business owner many years before my transition to non-profit work.

In my previous position at Mercy Corps Northwest, I worked with Steve Bell, a lean expert and two-time Shingo prize winner, and his partner Karen Whitley Bell, who shared my interest in the intersection of lean management and the non-profit world.⁸ He worked with our US-based Mercy Corps offices on several different projects to extend our learning and adaptation of lean to non-profit work, and in particular, to small-business lending and technical assistance. But, these experiences had all been in the U.S., in stable civil and economic systems. This new work environment was extremely different. I was faced with internal and external systems struggling to keep up, a staff that was stressed and on edge, a wall of complex, interrelated issues that were hindering program delivery, in a new culture and unstable environment. I had my hands full.

I want to add a note of explanation and caution at this point: the series of actions, interventions and strategies that are described here did not happen quickly, easily or solely under my direction or management. I was working with and within a team of very dedicated colleagues. When a story is told in retrospect, the necessary simplification and summary of events can sometimes deceive us into seeing the course of action as cleanly and logically driven, with a sense of predestined success. Nothing could be further from the truth. The processes that are condensed and summarized here were messy, stressful, often shrouded in confusion and moved forward by glimmers of intuition, experimentation and small little learning loops. They did not always move forward in consistent, clear, incremental steps. And while there was an overall logic and direction to the interventions informed by lean management principles, it is only in hindsight that I can see beyond that messiness and identify

⁸Lean4NGO, an organization founded by Steve Bell and Karen Whitey Bell to incorporate Lean principles in support of mission-driven non-profits and NGOs, <https://www.lean4ngo.org>

the key drivers and initiatives that led to substantial improvements. I am convinced that seeing and naming those principles clearly will allow me, and hopefully you, the reader, to apply these tools more quickly and efficiently in future situations. That, of course, is the larger learning loop that moves us forward.

Initial Efforts

Lean management practice teaches that a stable system is a prerequisite to any sustainable improvement efforts, a lesson which Steve Bell had to drill into us several times in our earlier work with Mercy Corps Northwest. In Liberia, we did not have anything approaching a stable system. We were scrambling to complete our tasks and meet our goals and, as an organization, tying ourselves into knots in the process. The volatility and uncertainty of the external environment added to the instability of our operations. My first instinct was to establish some sense of regularity in the environment we could control.

We began with weekly program management meetings. This was a big ask of our veteran program managers who were all much more experienced than me in international program delivery, and who were already stressed and extremely busy. I felt obligated to ensure the time I was asking them to invest was productive. Regular program meetings provided several immediate benefits.

For one, it allowed the program teams, as represented by the program managers, to discuss and understand the common obstacles and frustrations that their staff were experiencing, and which were hindering timely execution of program activities. This began to provide some focus for discussions with the Finance and Operations teams around priorities, blockages and breakdowns in communications. It started the process of identifying and addressing systemic issues that lay at the foundations of the individual complaints and frustrations of each week, and of each program team. We soon added regular meetings with the leads of Operations and

Finance teams. A consistent pattern of communications was helpful immediately, but it was only a first step in aligning our efforts. We were still a long way from root causes, but we were moving in the right direction.

The second benefit of regular meetings was that it provided the opportunity for the program managers to share insights, provide support and ideas to each other. It began to create a subtle but important positive shift in tone, attitude and perception of the challenges we faced. We created a consistent agenda, and began tracking workloads and program status with simple visuals. We recorded short term goals challenges and completions and carried them forward to future meetings for accountability and reference. There is nothing new or innovative about any of this, it is management 101. It did reinforce for me the importance and effectiveness of visualizing issues and problems, making information on status and challenges visible, and shared knowledge as a baseline for common action and understanding.

Stabilization, regularity and consistency became my internal mantra. The increased sense of predictability began to have calming effect on the overall zeitgeist of the office. This was reinforced by the resumption of bi-weekly senior leadership meetings (country director, deputy director, program leads, HR, Ops and Finance), regular weekly meetings with my program managers and a regular, monthly all-team meetings for the entire staff.

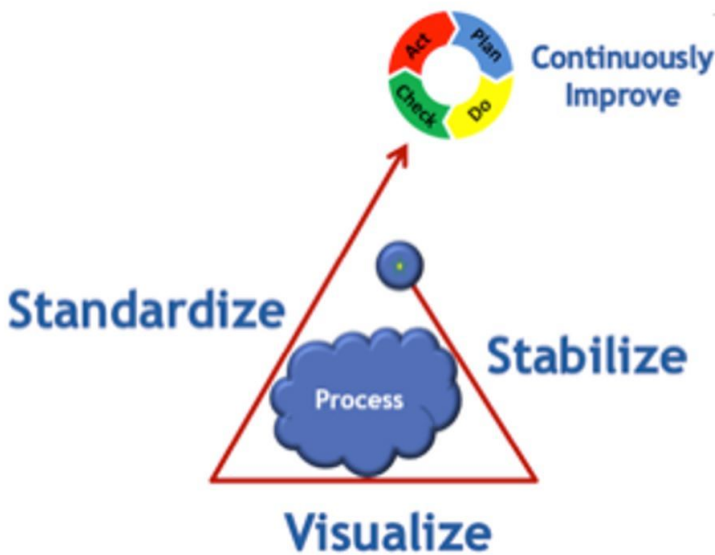


Image courtesy of The Lean Enterprise Institute

My regular weekly “supervision” meetings with program managers were actually more about providing support, prioritizing problems and maintaining a clear understanding of progress on the programs, ongoing tasks and responsibilities. The regularity of standard meetings (with the subsequent opportunities for dialogue, follow-up of ongoing work, and accountability) helped to shift our operational mode from hair-on-fire to moderate predictability. Problems had not been eliminated, blockages still remained, but we were starting to generate a sense of control, cooperation, and stability.

External circumstances were also working in our favor. As the Ebola crisis began to ease in intensity in early 2016, civil life started to recover its natural rhythm. Response programs all over the country were well underway and had settled into established activities with their partner organizations. Ebola vectors and treatments were better understood, and protocols for containing new outbreaks appeared to be successful.

There was an increasing sense of looking towards a future rather than being swallowed by an apocalyptic-like reality that had engulfed these three West African nations. These were all positive factors that helped with easing internal tension of the organization, but we still had a long ways to go.

Next Steps

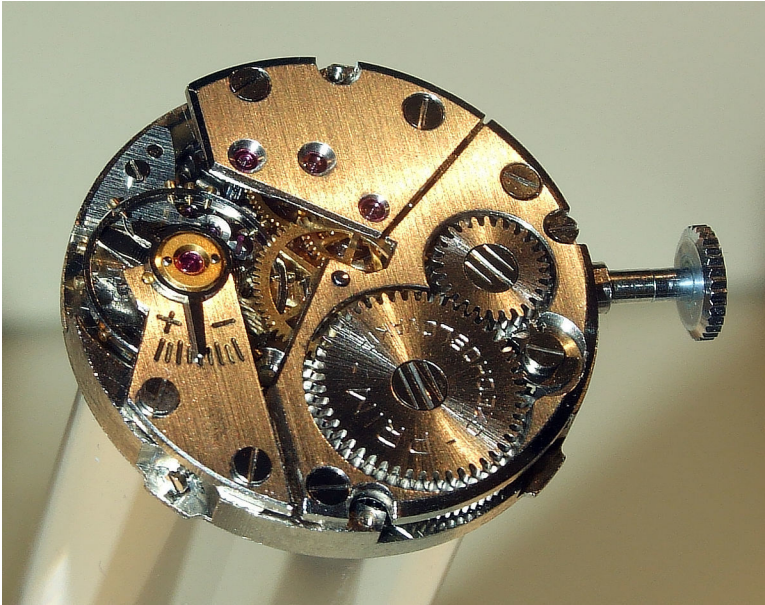
As a country office, we had made some initial progress in identifying key issues that were disrupting program delivery. We were not yet at a point of stable operations that would benefit from regular continuous improvement (kaizen) efforts, but there were glimmers of hope. We had clear standard operating procedures (SOPs) for many of the core functions of the finance and operations teams. These were agency-wide policies driven by the need for financial accountability, donor compliance and best practices as stewards of our funders' resources.

SOPs, though, can be a double-edged sword. They defined what steps and practices need to be followed, but do not manage how that work flows within the context of daily operations. SOPs can also be used as a cudgel in beating back the demands of colleague teams for quicker, more responsive action. To program staff under pressure and chomping at the bit to get something done, nothing smacks more of frustrating, unresponsive bureaucracy than a deferral to "the finance manual." We chose to take advantage of the structure provided by our SOPs to make improvements in two areas. I will start first with the operations team and the use of instituting standard work with the operations team, our primary focus. I will also touch briefly on work with our finance team that utilized SOPs as a jumping off point for process improvement work.

Confusion of Standard Work vs. Standardized Work

There appears to be some confusion in the lean world around the term “standard work.” In some contexts, especially manufacturing or highly process-oriented workplaces, standard work is used synonymously for “standardized work” i.e. a series of highly regular specifications and actions defined for a particular part or step in the manufacturing process. This is certainly a legitimate use of the term, and fits lean’s emphasis on eliminating variation that can lead to waste or rework.

The other use of the term “standard work” operates in a the context of understanding work cycles, regular and predictable points of intersection and coordination with other functions in the larger system of production or service delivery. This is also a very appropriate use of the term “standard work.” It reflects lean’s interest in constructing consistent, efficient workflow across multiple touchpoints, a key tool in eliminating waste in lead times and rework, and in ensuring maximum value for the resources invested in the process. This is the sense of “standard work” which we are using in this discussion.



Prim clockwork of a wristwatch, watchmaking exhibition, Municipal Museum, Nove Mesto nad Metuji, Czech Republic. Creative Commons Attribution Share-Alike 3.0 by Kozuch

The image that comes to mind as an analogy of standard work is the inner works of a mechanical clock. There are many gears of different sizes, different teeth, stops and ratchets that engage at specific times and planned intervals. All these components must do their part, complete their functions at the right time, in the right sequence in order for the clock to be useful and keep accurate time. Within an organization, standard work defines and organizes those gears and ratchets of tasks, creating a framework for the activities of individuals, the team, and the entire organization. Unlike the gear works of a watch, standard work does not define and determine all the essential activities of a person or team. It is only provides the necessary skeleton on which everything else is built.

Implementing Standard Work with the Operations Team

The operations team provided logistic support to the program teams and administrative staff, administered procurement of goods and services, and kept the infrastructure of the office and communications systems functional. Breakdowns in any of these responsibilities had negative ripple effects throughout the organization, often compounding into unforeseen problems, re-work, tension and frustration for program teams and administration staff. It was hard to get much done if the electric generators broke down, vehicles were in the shop, teams could not make it into the field, or program supplies were not delivered on time.

A positive characteristic of the Operations team was that they tended to be the most stable, consistently employed staff in the country organization. Programs teams were built and dispersed as grants were won and finished, but the core of the operations team was supported by the aggregation of funding from active grants. It was not unusual to have driver with 5-10 years of service with the agency. This relative stability provided the opportunity to build a strong, functional team that would anchor improvements throughout the country program.

Rollout and Integration

We began the process of stabilization by establishing a clear structure of standard work for the Operations team. We implemented standard work templates incrementally, starting with the two senior operations officers, one of whom was my direct report. After an initial orientation to the concepts of standard work and plans for adoption, the first task for of the operations team members was to answer the question “Can you identify your responsibilities that need to happen regularly on cycles of each day, each week, each month or quarter?”

It took several iterations with each team member to create a comprehensive schedule of their respective standard work. Their first inclination was invariably to create a to-do list that encompassed everything that team member felt responsible for, or did in the course of the day or week (usually way too much information). There was also a tendency to reproduce the content of their position descriptions. In both these cases, we had to refocus on the key characteristic of standard work: tasks or responsibilities that were intended to happen on regular, planned cycles. Many of the staff had responsibilities that were mainly responsive to other schedules or demands of the workflow.

The drivers, for example, rarely had two days that ever looked the same. Similarly, procurement officers (for the most part) managed requests from the other teams in the organization, but they had no control over the ebbs and flows of demand. As we identified their standard work, some staff had fewer identified tasks on their lists. It took several conversations to reassure them that their standard work lists, even if they simpler, shorter and less loaded with identified tasks, were not meant to reflect how hard they were working, or how much responsibility they carried. It only identified the parts of their work that happened on a regular schedule. In their case, the bulk of their work was simply irregular. It did not conform to a regular, planned schedule.

We created an Excel spreadsheet for each team member which outlined and defined their standard work schedule. This was their tool, and their responsibility to print on 11"x14" sheets, and post in their workspace each month. The matrix included checkboxes for each of the tasks which proved to be very useful as a tool for weekly check-in meetings with their supervisors. After each month, the schedule was reviewed, and updates were made as responsibilities were added or changed (Figure 1).

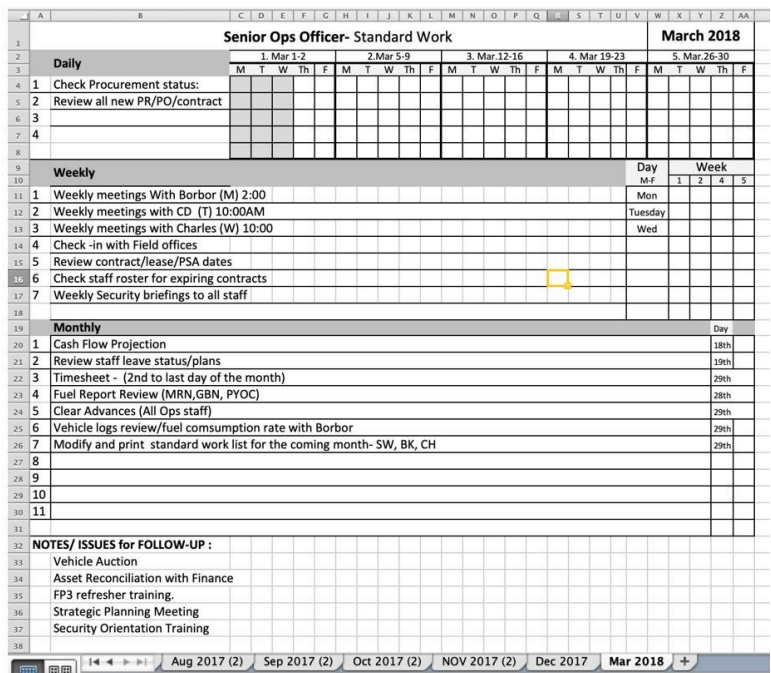


Figure 1. Example of spreadsheet-based Standard Work template. I am happy to forward digital copies the standard work template, simple request via email.

This simple visual management tool is effective for several reasons:

- The initial creation of the list by the team member and his/her supervisor provides the opportunity for clarifying key responsibilities, their frequency, and even the time of execution, if that is critical.
- Regular updating at the end of each month keeps key tasks current and visible. This facilitates coordination with other teams and individuals. It also keeps key tasks from becoming tribal knowledge, which is critical information when people change jobs.
- Identifying and posting the frequency and times of regular meetings with other teams and individuals helps to ensure coordination and execution.

- The list essentially constitutes an agreement and commitment by the team member and his/her supervisor. This provides a baseline of expected performance that is clear, objective and transparent. It is a great tool as a jumping off spot in weekly supervision meetings to discuss workload, obstacles and needed support.
- As new tasks are integrated into regular processes, having your team's standard work visible and readily available helps to ensure the task is assigned, understood and integrated immediately.
- It can be helpful for understanding and making adjustments to a team member's workload.
- Notice that updating, printing and posting the next month's standard work matrix is built into the regular monthly tasks.

Since effective use of this tool relies on consistent application, I had to model this effort with my Operations manager. We met weekly, and reviewed his matrix, discussed challenges and outstanding issues, and made notes and modifications for the next month's iteration. We would then walk over to his direct report, the other senior operations officer who had taken part in the initial rollout, where he would take the lead in reviewing his colleague's matrix. They both learned quickly, and after a month or two, we were ready to roll out the implementation of standard work to the next levels of the operations team.

It is easy for misunderstandings and misconceptions to emerge in a new initiative. Consequently, a bit of diligence was required to ensure that the concept, tools and implementation remained true to the standard work model as it cascaded deeper into the staff structure. The best practice of "gemba walks" (being present, asking questions and being engaged where the work is actually happening) is the best remedy for the deviations and misunderstandings that will inevitably happen.

Results

The overall impact of implementing standard work in the operations team was very positive.

- The identification of responsibilities and scheduled work helped to establish a rhythm to the work that promoted a stable, predictable system. This is the necessary precondition before digging in with more intensive process improvement work that we were working towards.
- The implementation of standard work cut down immensely on the inefficiencies the team had been experiencing for a long while. Regularity of oversight, creation and review of performance reports, consistent meetings with other departments, and coordinated schedules all worked together to reduce lead times for key tasks. It also reduced the level of rework of expired or lost documents, inaccurate information, or subverting processes.
- The regular communication and feedback loops that were built in to all levels of standard work improved communications among team members, and more importantly, with the other departments of the organization. This all resulted in a smoother, more efficient and less stressful system that provided the needed support to the programs team, and by extension, to our participants and stakeholders.

Process Improvement with the Finance Team

For the Operations team, our agency-wide SOPs, which defined roles and responsibilities for given tasks, gave us a jumping off point for our initial work on process stabilization. Similarly, with the Finance team, we used the Field Finance Manual, which define the SOPs for the finance team as our starting point for initiating an

intensive process improvement project. But in this case, we were able to move directly to improvement work with this team because they already demonstrated a higher level of process stability. Their work and processes were already defined by the Field Finance manual, compliance requirements for funders, general accounting principles and best practices. These multiple levels of agency-wide guidance ensure that country programs meet the requirements of both regular internal and external financial audits. Our team (as a unit) demonstrated stability, but not efficiency, which made it a prime target for a Kaizen (rapid improvement) event.

One of the consistent frustrations voiced by our program managers was the long wait times to secure reviews and authorization from the finance team for procurements, checks for vendors, and approvals of contracts. These long wait times often held up direct program activities and operational readiness that supported the field teams. Efforts to accommodate the long wait times by planning farther ahead had not been very successful, primarily because of the highly dynamic, unpredictable context of the field work. Since the required processes were already defined by the Field Finance Manual, we used those process maps to jump start an A3 problem solving analysis. This helped us understand the scope of the problem, explore the root causes, and propose solutions and tracking of results.



We engaged the Finance team in a Kaizen event in which we identified problems and waste in both lead and process times, and distilled down the root causes. We then laid out a new process map, with an emphasis on continuous flow of the documents which needed review, authorization and checks for completion. We set an ambitious goal: any check requests, reviews or authorizations that were submitted by 10:00 am would be approved and ready by

2:00 pm that afternoon. This was a 4 hour turnaround in a system that typically generated waiting times of a week or more. Success was predicated on having the necessary information and correct forms which came from program staff. This required a parallel effort to engage and educate the Program teams in order to improve the quality of documents they submitted, and eliminate common mistakes, omissions, and resulting re-work.

As we implemented the new process flow, we set up a simple visual management board in the Finance office to record the volume of documents, number of re-works, and average turn around time to complete transactions each day. The board was reviewed with the team weekly, and modifications in the process were made as we encountered unforeseen issues and refined our processes. Over the course of several months, the effort was successful and the “in-by 10, out-by-2” promise was institutionalized and became the norm.

Summary

There is an axiom in the lean world that lean tools cannot be effectively adopted without establishing a culture of continuous process improvement. There are innumerable stories of companies or organizations conducting a one-off “kaizen” event, or an isolated process improvement initiative, without providing a foundation which would sustain their efforts. These short-sighted and opportunistic efforts (which usually die off slowly with questionable results) should be kept in context. They should not incline practitioners to take an “all or nothing” approach to introducing lean practices into a struggling organization. The principles of lean process management, which are based in common sense, scientific process and logic, can be a benefit to any organization.

The key is the order of implementation. Process stability is the baseline, and creates the conditions needed for holistic continuous improvement, step by step. One cannot construct a tall building on mud and expect it to stand, as it will invariably collapse for lack

of a solid foundation. The foundation is the first step, and even if progress halts temporarily at that stage, that foundation remains ready for the next step in the construction process. In lean work, stable processes are the foundation from which all other progress proceeds. We found in Mercy Corps Liberia that the adoption of standard work provided an effective, practical tool for establishing a foundation of process stability. We saw first hand the quantifiable improvements that resulted from the process of establishing standard work matrices for the members of the Operations team. We have every reason to believe that the progress we made was sustainable and would continue to benefit the Operations team and the country program, even if no further lean processes were initiated. If there was the opportunity to take the next steps in lean management, the foundation has been established. That is an outcome worth the effort.

Epilogue

I finished my assignment in Liberia before we were able to take those next steps of process improvements with the operations team. This illuminates another inherent challenge in establishing a culture of continuous improvement in development and non-profit work. There is often a lot of turnover in both program and senior leadership. In large part, this is because much of the program work is grant driven, with defined time periods for funding and execution. When a program ends, the team is disbanded, and unless there is another program ready to absorb the available staff, they disperse into the community. Often times they end up in employment with other INGOs who are opening new programs and are in need of staff. The opening and closing of new programs directly affects the size of the country program's portfolio, which determines the budget for leadership and administrative staff.

Turnover in leadership and program management complicates efforts to maintain a consistent culture, especially if new leadership

is unfamiliar with lean process and continuous improvement work. Some backsliding is inevitable without efforts to review, refresh processes relative to new conditions, and changing contexts. New improvement work consistent with an overall strategic improvement plan can be difficult to prioritize and initiate without consistency in leadership.

These challenges should not prevent us from using lean principles to lay solid foundation that also pay immediate dividends in effectiveness and efficiency. The fact that there will be continuous changes in management does underline the need for creating clear documentation and visual management tools that become integral to daily work. It also points to the need to create a sense of ownership and autonomy of the rationale and logic of processes in the team and its members. This internalization of lean principles (promoting curiosity, experimentation, and learning), can then be carried forward like a positive contagion. It can spread successfully within an organization, and into new organizations, as team members carry their careers forward.

Proceeds

Proceeds of this book chapter will be given to Mercy Corps, which is a global team of humanitarians, working together to alleviate suffering, poverty and oppression by helping people build secure, productive and just communities. In more than 40 countries around the world, their nearly 6,000 team members work side by side with people living through poverty, disaster, violent conflict and the acute impacts of climate change. They're committed to creating global change through local impact, as 85 percent of team members are from the countries where they work. Learn more at <https://www.mercycorps.org>

Contact

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Resources and Next Steps

Helping nonprofits

Would you like to volunteer your experience with a not-for-profit organization? You can search for volunteers groups near you (both US and International), and get advice on setting up your own volunteer group at the following website: <http://www.leansixsigmaforgood.com/local-lean-six-sigma-and-nonprofit-groups/>



Volunteer from Lean Portland help map the donation receiving floor layout at the Gresham (OR) ReStore.

Sharing your experiences

If you know someone who has spent time helping nonprofits or not-for-profit organizations apply process improvement techniques, please contact me at brion@biz-pi.com for more information about contributing to Volume 3.

Learn more

If you'd like to search for more case studies and examples of Lean and Six Sigma applied to nonprofits in different countries and different types of organizations, or to connect with our social media and networking platforms, please visit <http://LeanSixSigmaforGood.com>.

