

How to drive improvements while maintaining business as usual

Anyone who has ever attended Lean training knows that alarm bells should ring when subject matter experts respond to questions by saying “well, we’ve always done it this way”.

In a transactional environment, you can usually take “always” to mean since the process was computerised, or for as long as anyone can remember, but at the heart of government there are admin processes which appear to have remained fundamentally unchanged for centuries.

A recent report by the Institute for Government (IFG), an independent think tank aiming to improve government efficiency, suggests Brexit might lead to something of a breaking point – there isn’t enough time to pass all the required legislation for Brexit while simultaneously passing legislation that the government, and indeed the country, would normally require.

Could some Lean thinking be in order?

It’s a problem that many managers have faced over the years – you know there is an increase in demand coming, you have a good idea of the scale and the timing, but your team is already running at or near capacity. It’s also the kind of scenario that’s very familiar to experienced Lean practitioners, because this is where they come into their own. A better understanding of the process is clearly needed, but first it’s important to define exactly what we want to achieve – if we agree that the general public are the customers, which outputs are critical to them?

This is an example of a process where having a good understanding of customer requirements is essential. The required cycle time is already known, as we leave the EU on March 29th 2019 and it all must be in place by then. The work content time, i.e. how much effort is put in to passing each law, is clearly the primary concern.

However, watching the state opening of Parliament, where the government’s legislative program is announced by The Queen wearing the Parliamentary Robe of State and the Imperial State Crown, after the Lord Great Chamberlain has raised his Wand of Office and Black Rod has struck the doors to Parliament with the end of his ceremonial staff, it is tempting to think there could also be some obvious efficiency savings.

We need to be careful here though – there are those who would argue that the pomp and ceremony is a required secondary output of the process, so we’d better concentrate on the timings.

Once the project is defined, the next step would be to fully understand the process – are there documented process maps which show precisely the steps between recognition that legislation is required and the changes becoming law? As a UK citizen, you get the impression that this is extremely complex and there’s probably not many people who know the whole process well, but maybe therein lies one of the key reasons it takes so long. Swim lane mapping events will be required to help build a picture of exactly what is going on. The process could be broken down into manageable chunks to make it easier to involve the right subject matter experts, and no doubt the Palace could send a representative to explain Her Majesty’s involvement so she doesn’t need to attend in person.

Validating the process and gathering data will also be an important part of the measure phase. The IFG report says the average Queen’s Speech contains 20 new bills, maybe we can use historical data to understand what proportion involve a rework loop (the House of Lords referring bills back to the House of Commons for example) and flat out defects, bills that are announced but never actually become law.

Next comes the value and waste analysis – a quick glance at the 8 wastes and it becomes clear it would be fascinating to know the value-added ratio in relation to all the effort that goes into passing legislation. Lean Facilitators should avoid reaching conclusions too soon in a project, but you do get a sense that Waiting, Over-Processing and Over-Production could be significant issues in an administrative process which only triggers 20 times per year, and on which there’s little existing data on how long it takes or how often it succeeds.

Understanding all of this would be a key moment in the project, this will give the team a clear indication of what could be changed, and how big the potential improvement is. Again, while we shouldn't pre-judge the results of the analysis, it's hard not to think it would be huge.

Of course, this would be a big project and in reality you can see how it might be a hard sell to persuade the parliamentary authorities to launch it, even with the potentially huge benefits. The UK's ancient law making processes will probably be expected to creak onwards despite the IFG's warnings about the unprecedented scale of the challenge Brexit presents. After all, we've always done it this way.



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Mike is a certified Lean Six Sigma Black Belt with nine years' experience of leading hard benefit generating projects across multiple functions of a large organisation.

He has delivered numerous Continuous Improvement training courses, and coached colleagues at all stages of the Lean Six Sigma training process.

Bourton Group has supported many businesses from a wide range of industries to implement Lean improvement techniques via tailored engagement programs.

We work collaboratively to deliver on efficiency objectives and targets, with returns on investment of over 20:1 being reported, along with wider benefits of reducing waste, decreasing time to complete activities and improvements to quality – all of which have been directly attributed to Lean.

If you would like to find out more about how Bourton Group can help to fix your business. **And help it to stay fixed.** Please get in touch...

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