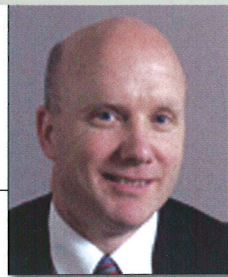


By Barry L. Zimmerman



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**T**he word “empowerment” is often used when human service agencies describe our goals with respect to clients—and staff. We may spend considerable time defining what it means to “empower clients” when we engage in strategic planning, but clarifying what is meant by “staff empowerment” can be difficult. Does “empowering staff” mean asking front-line staff to contribute to key policy decisions? Does surveying employees on ways to improve customer service qualify as “empowering staff?”

## What Do We Mean by ‘Empowerment?’

Perhaps. But, what would an organization look like if all staff were empowered and trained to solve problems in real-time during the process of completing their daily work? The County of Ventura Human Services Agency expects to find out in the coming years through the cultivation of a Lean Six Sigma philosophy within the agency.

In mid-2008, the County of Ventura Executive Office introduced Lean Six Sigma to all of its agencies. With cautious optimism, the HSA agreed to learn about this process improvement methodology that has enjoyed such great success in the private sector, and started to get comfortable with new terminology like “Green Belt,” “Kaizen Event” and “Just Do Its.” Within 18 months, the HSA conducted 11 rapid process improvement Kaizen Events and achieved nearly \$600,000 in “soft savings” (e.g., redirection of staff time to more valuable tasks) and “hard savings” (e.g., reduction in printing costs) due to streamlining and standardizing business processes.

The HSA executive team selects and sponsors each Kaizen Event, ensuring that the topics align with our strategic plan and that quantitative data are analyzed to measure the success of each event. Facilitated by trained Green

Belts, the events bring together subject-matter experts at all levels of the organization—clerical staff, eligibility workers, center managers, computer system experts and others—to work as a team to improve critical processes in one week’s time. Nearly all Kaizen team members have reported that they accomplished more during the one-week Kaizen Event than they could have accomplished during a more traditional several-month workgroup. Moreover, nearly all Kaizen team members have expressed how empowered

they felt when making decisions about the business processes that they perform every day—that they know best.

While I was pleased with our agency’s success with Kaizen Events, I saw that Lean Six Sigma could drive a deeper, more sustainable type of organizational change. Indeed, running Kaizen Events had offered the agency not only a new way of driving rapid change, but also a new lens through which to evaluate our leadership and management styles.

Through Kaizen Events, we recognized that we had to shift our organizational culture to one that places the same value on “improvement work” that we place on “real work.” Very importantly, we acknowledged that we must trust that our staff who perform the work each day are eminently qualified to determine how best to improve the work. Further, we confirmed that standardizing our work does not stunt our creativity, but instead gives us a foundation that facilitates future change and continuous improvement. After all, if everyone is trained to do the work in the same fashion, swapping out tasks and rotating job assignments can be accomplished much more easily.

The HSA is scheduled to engage in a number of Kaizen Events over the next

several months; the topics range from improving the timeliness of medical exams for foster children, to standardizing the work flow for processing mail-in applications, to streamlining the process for purchasing equipment in the agency. We take pride in our commitment to utilizing Lean Six Sigma tools and continue to analyze the lessons learned through our Kaizen Events.

However, as much as the HSA will benefit from continuing to conduct formal Kaizen Events that draw the subject matter experts from the field to focus their energies on a specific assignment, the agency will also benefit from training staff to solve problems in the field. To

take Lean Six Sigma implementation to the next level, the HSA is working with leadership and management to explore ways that staff can be given the time and the appropriate information (i.e., high-level agreements and boundaries) to make decisions and codify them as a part of their regular work. While an impressive 10 percent of HSA’s workforce has participated in at least one Kaizen Event or formal workgroup using Lean Six Sigma tools over the past two years, many more of our staff are fully capable of contributing to process improvement as part of their daily work.

Do we, as leaders and managers, have what it takes to give up some measure of control in order to cultivate a workforce more invested than ever in the success of the organization? We will likely suffer some bumps along the way, but I don’t know of any group more qualified to both identify areas needing improvement and conduct the improvement work than those staff who are intimately familiar with the work. Building a Lean Six Sigma culture, I believe, will go a long way toward truly empowering our staff and positioning our agency to weather the budgetary, workload and other challenges on the near horizon. ■