



Feature Article

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Lean Six Sigma: How Nonprofits Can Move Beyond “Do More with Less”

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It is an adage, all too well known, that most nonprofit managers dread: “do more with less”. Combined with advances in technology and the ever changing needs of clients, it is also a reminder that in the nonprofit world, no one can afford to stand still. In order to be efficient and effective, nonprofits need to continuously evaluate their organizational structures and make adjustments. But how can we both provide better services and increase our ability to serve more?

In our everyday work, there are bound to be opportunities for improvement. Whether internal or external, process improvements increase our capacity to serve. Ultimately, such improvements result in “working smarter” toward one end goal – the missions of our organizations.

How often do we do something because it has always been done that way? Steps may be eliminated by changing the sequence of workflow. The use of technology may automate manual processes rather than pushing paper around the office. Service times may vary but could become more consistent through the standardization of procedures.

The application of practices such as Six Sigma and Lean have proven to be successful in organizational improvement. Despite originally being designed for manufacturing processes, these practices have been extended to improve transactional processes in business, government and nonprofit organizations – and can enhance service while reducing costs if implemented correctly.

Six Sigma sounds intimidating but simply provides a systematic, data-driven approach to process improvement through the five phases known as DMAIC – Define, Measure, Analyze, Improve, and Control. The Control phase may be considered the most important, as it ensures sustainability of the results achieved. Likewise, Six Sigma is often combined with Lean practices, which focus on eliminating unnecessary steps referred to as types of “wastes”. The two combined, known as Lean Six Sigma, provide a range of tools for organizational improvement through redesigning processes and standardizing the quality of services.

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Rebecca Coker is a consultant for FMA and a certified Six Sigma Black Belt. She holds an MPA from New York University's Robert F. Wagner Graduate School of Public Service and a BS in Chemical Engineering from Purdue University. For more information on how your organization may utilize methods like Lean Six Sigma, contact Rebecca Coker at RCoker@fmaonline.net.