



NEWS...

From

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LEAN IS NOT SO MEAN AFTER ALL

Since my first campaign in 2009, I have been advocating for LEAN government. When I talk to folks in government about “lean” they look at me with varying degrees of uncertainty based on a range of thoughts from, “our government is already TOO lean,” to “our government is so big; we will never be able to make it lean.” Then I explain what “lean” is and invariably, ears perk up, eyebrows raise, and the remark is always, “that sounds like a great idea.”

According to the Home page on the Iowa.gov official website, Office of Lean Enterprise, “Lean is a collection of principles, methods and tools that improve the speed and efficiency of any process by eliminating waste.” It’s a method of breaking systems and processes down to their components, making them visible, and eradicating the steps that don’t add value. It’s not at all ethereal, but rather quite scientific, so much so that some of our finest institutions, such as Stony Brook University, for example, are teaching Lean to public policy and business students.

Most of us can agree that there are many inefficiencies in government, brought about not necessarily by lazy employees, but by broken systems neglected by the “that’s the way we’ve always done it” crowd. These inefficiencies manifest themselves in many ways: unnecessary or duplicative paperwork (in many cases, paperwork in general is just waste in today’s information age), poor communication, wasted scarce personnel resources, elongated processes, squelched innovation, etc. Ultimately, employees, taxpayers and “customers” suffer.

Customers? It is ignorant to assert that government doesn’t have customers. The business applying for a building permit, the social services client, the prospective buyer of a piece of government land, the restaurant owner awaiting health department approval, the developer awaiting sewer hookup...the list goes on and on. There are INTRA-governmental customers as well. The police official waiting for the Department of Public Works to repair a squad car, the Division of Real Estate waiting for I.T. to install the latest G.I.S. software, the County Treasurer waiting for the local Receiver of Taxes to transfer tax payments and the school districts waiting to receive their distribution of those taxes...all are customers.

Figuring out how to serve customers more efficiently and effectively is an undertaking that every successful private sector business goes through every day. It's called continuous improvement. Those who have been successful and those who have failed know the importance of continuous improvement all too well. Now, with arguably the worst economy in decades and the taxpayer trough drying up, government leaders are waking up, and the ages-old rhetoric of 'doing more with less' is actually turning into doing more with less by working smarter, not just harder.

It's been estimated that for many unchecked processes, only 5% of the effort expended actually adds value. That means up to 95% of what we're doing is waste. Those who are impacted by government all just uttered a resounding "duh!" They've come to believe that waste and government are synonymous and that government efficiency is an oxymoron. And many in government have accepted this premise as an inevitable reality. There are governments today, however, that are turning that belief on its head and, in so doing, turning their governments, and indeed their economies into lean (but not so mean) machines. The states of Iowa, Connecticut and Minnesota are great examples. Even New York State has gotten into the act. Its Office of Alcoholism and Substance Abuse Services went through a Lean event. Just Google "Lean government" and you'll find a number of excellent examples.

Through legislation currently before the Suffolk County Legislature, I have proposed that our Planning Department prepare a feasibility study on implementing Lean principles in County government. As publisher, Dave Wilmott (may he rest in peace) used to say, "And Why Not?" Suffolk County has led the way with a variety of regulatory measures over the years. Why not lead the way in terms of actually making government work better? We may not be the first, but we can be one of the first. Our taxpayers deserve it and, after all, times demand it.

For a copy of the bill, go to: www.tomcilmi.com/legislation