



Washington State Auditor's Office

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Local Government Performance Center Cowlitz County is a Lean inspiration

Background

Our Lean Academy program, part of the Local Government Performance Center, traveled to Cowlitz County to facilitate a kaizen event for the Treasurer's Office on its real estate excise tax (REET) affidavit process. The event engaged staff and supported changes that inspired County leadership to ask the Performance Center to train County staff in Lean basics, and to gain expertise to facilitate Lean activities on their own. The success of the first kaizen inspired others at the Clerk's office and later, the Assessor's office.

The Lean success story in Cowlitz isn't limited to the very positive results from each individual kaizen event — it is a story of a whole county transforming itself into an efficient government that works for its residents.

The Treasurer's Office redesigns process, space

The Treasurer's Office wanted to use Lean philosophy to improve its REET affidavit process, which involves four offices. It took staff 20 minutes to process a single affidavit, and up to 30 days for all four offices to complete all the steps needed to process each one. Staff members found the process prone to errors but also time-consuming and inefficient, not least because they had to walk documents back and forth within their office space frequently.

The kaizen event, facilitated by our Lean Specialist, was an ideal strategy to improve a process involving many departments, as the kaizen process is designed for complex processes. Following the kaizen team's hard work, the Treasurer's Office realized it was necessary to redesign the physical office space to help reduce waste. This tremendously improved the work flow and made the work process much more efficient. The Office gained additional efficiency by making its submissions to title companies electronic.

"Train the trainer" workshop helps create Lean culture

The Cowlitz County Lean Team requested the Lean Academy provide a "train the trainer" training to give County staff the skills to create a strong culture of continuous improvement in Cowlitz County government. This training was a major success, and gave many staff members the philosophy, tools and expertise needed to apply Lean practices without direct involvement from the Performance Center.



kaizen

noun

a Japanese business philosophy of continuous improvement of working practices, personal efficiency, etc.

County extends Lean training to Clerk's office

The Lean Specialist, assisted by Cowlitz County staff, then facilitated a kaizen for the County Clerk's office focused on the felony first appearance docket. This process included many extra steps, delays and redundancies; staff members often made extra trips between the jail and the courthouse.

After the kaizen, the Clerk's office was able to better coordinate with the myriad other offices involved in the overall court process, and take advantage of technological advancements in electronically sharing information between people involved in the overall court process. Many of the process improvements identified during the kaizen are still being implemented, with still more expected.

Continuous improvement in Cowlitz County

Having helped to facilitate two kaizen events, the Lean team in Cowlitz County moved on to help more offices, including the Assessor. Lean is becoming a culture and a way of organizational design in Cowlitz County, encouraged by County leadership who have seen the benefits of Lean firsthand and trust the process to reduce waste and rework, allowing the County to work better for its residents. Indeed, process improvements like that of the REET affidavit will have direct, positive effects for residents as they do business with the County.

Lean represents strategies that support change and engage employees from all levels: line staff, subject matter experts, middle management and leadership. The series of trainings and facilitation in Cowlitz County resulted in departmental improvements and gave many staff the expertise needed to facilitate kaizens to maintain process improvement without direct oversight from the Performance Center. Cowlitz County is integrating Lean philosophy and practices into the Cowlitz Total Quality Initiative. Through Lean education and implementing improvements to government operations, Cowlitz County has distinguished itself as a role model for other counties not just in Washington, but around the country.

The Local Government Performance Center offers the Lean Academy

The Local Government Performance Center has developed the Lean Academy to help more local governments learn and use Lean strategies. The Academy brings a supportive environment to the trainings offered to local government employees, so they can learn process improvement techniques side-by-side with peers from similar organizations.

Typical Lean Academy workshops deliver three days of training on Lean techniques followed by a one-week workshop analyzing their processes. Attendees observe one another's experiences and have the opportunity to help each other learn and grow.

For more information about the Lean Academy, email the Local Government Performance Center at performance@sao.wa.gov or call us at (360) 725-5621



To learn more about the Lean Academy, go to:
www.sao.wa.gov/local/Pages/LGPC.aspx

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