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Lean in HE

Lean has been around now for a number of years most notably in the manufacturing world, moving into health care and slowly starting to be used in every walk of life. Higher Education could be seen as coming late to the party but they have been part of this world now for nearly ten years.

There is no doubt that to become a lean organisation takes hard work and effort most importantly it takes real buy in from senior management and engagement from all staff. This is not something that can be achieved overnight and in fact ten years just means that Higher Education is in its infancy when it comes to lean implementation.

On my travels I have seen a huge number of successful improvement projects being implemented and benefits being recorded. I have met staff who are enthused and motivated to make changes to how they do things to improve life for their customers and colleagues. I have met senior managers who see lean as the way to drive not only day to day improvements but the transformational change that is needed to keep their part of the institution moving forward. However, these pockets of activity whilst impressive are not driving the institution as a whole to being a lean organisation.

When I first started in Higher Education I was struck by how complex the structures, the processes and the relationships were. For me to prove if there was a place for lean in this environment I needed to demonstrate its benefits not just at local team levels but at the strategic business levels. To do this I developed a model that tackled three main areas: -

- **Purpose** – developing the strategy for improvement to create alignment to the vision and secure engagement in what needs to be done to achieve it
- **Processes** – improving processes from end to end by unpicking the complexity in order to make work flow through the organisation
- **People** – developing the skills of individuals and creating capacity for them to improve what they do on a day to day basis to ensure that value is constantly and consistently being delivered

There is nothing new in this model, it is simple in its design and yet its implementation is problematic. Why?

Let's take each in turn

Purpose

I once spent three hours with an area trying to help them define their purpose. Another area had written a full paper on it and struggled to distil this down to one meaningful statement that could be owned by everyone. Some areas just get it and look at me strangely when I want to spend more time in dissecting it further.

The purpose should be short and sharp. It should be written in a way that is easily understood by not only the people that work in that area but those that live outside of it. A purpose can change and that is OK after all a strategy document should be alive. It needs to be underpinned by defining what needs to be done to achieve it through analysis of barriers, enablers and clarity of what success looks like.

Once the purpose is agreed then you can start to align work, people, projects, resources etc. to deliver this. You can prioritise, decide what you are going to switch on, switch off (yes you are allowed to do that!) or improve. You can assign accountability and responsibility i.e. give ownership to people to make this happen. You can connect people and groups to make them drive through the change together.

From this work invariably comes issues with process.

Process

So the university is a complex beast. I hate to think how many individual processes there are that happen throughout the academic year. I once visited a team who were trying to identify the activities in the student system. They had a large white wall on which they listed out each and then tried to connect them. They were on their fourth iteration with over 400 identified! I'm still not sure if they managed it.

In doing improvement you cannot ignore this complexity you need to understand it. I have long believed that to do this in higher education you need to focus around three key processes: -

- **Lifecycle of a Student** - charting the journey a student goes on from thinking about going to university through to graduation and an ongoing relationship
- **Lifecycle of a Research Project** – looking at the activities that go into supporting the research project from concept through to shut down
- **Lifecycle of a Staff Member** – recognising that staff also have a journey within the organisation and understanding all the things that go into making that a successful relationship

Having some sort of visual around each of these areas helps to highlight linkages and connections between processes. It helps to identify the key areas of the organisation that are involved at the various stages of the journey. This knowledge helps you to identify areas that need to be improved, helps prioritise the order in which areas are to be looked at, helps you to create boundaries and scope for work and ensures you involve the right people at the right time.

Working with the lifecycles will ultimately allow you to align structure, people and resources in a way that delivers value throughout the journey. It allows you to assign accountability and responsibility along the length of a process and it gives staff the understanding of the end to end process.

With staff understanding comes the need to equip them with the tools needed to improve what they do on a day to day basis.

People

Whilst this is about providing staff with a skill set more importantly it is about developing the desired behaviour and culture in the institution. A culture that grows from the lean principles is one that has respect at its core. Lean promotes the development of a customer value driven ethos which is used to drive improvements in delivery and service. Through the engagement of those that do the job working practices are improved through the continuous removal of waste and failure demand to ensure that services and products are delivered in the most effective and efficient way possible.

This should not be a one off activity. That is why it is so essential that time and effort is put into developing staff to be able to continuously review and reflect on what they do to ensure that it continues to deliver what is needed in the best way possible. This is not purely about training but also about providing the time and space in which to plan what needs to be done, to run workshops and implement changes, to analyse the data and results of activities and to learn and develop from what they have found (you make recognise the Plan, Do, Check, Act cycle).

These individuals coming together to review and solve problems and issues can be a force to be reckoned with. Such a group directed by a strategic plan and a willingness to improve along the end to end process will be almost unstoppable.

To Finish

All sounds so easy doesn't it? There are a huge number of blockers and barriers to making this all happen which is a discussion for another day. My observations here are that we can continue to work away at improving processes, or bits of processes, that will indeed improve things for people and teams. However, if we do not start to use lean at a more strategic level and imbed it as the culture and behaviours we exhibit, we will not become the flexible and responsive institution that is needed to meet the changing world and continuing challenges that brings.

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