Ready to take action?

Here are 10 ways to put Lean to work starting now

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1. Meet with several of the people you serve – your customers. Informally interview them to learn more about what they do and how they use what you deliver to them. Use this "voice of the customer" to pinpoint one or two things you can do differently that would have tremendous value to them. After you put these improvements to work, circle back to the customers in two or three weeks to ensure a good result.

2. Meet with your "supplier" – someone who provides you with something you need as the process unfolds – and ask a few key questions to better understand what they do and how they do it. After you learn, if there are ways they can improve any aspect of what they supply to you, by all means open the dialogue and offer your suggestions. Of course, be a diplomat!

3. Use the SIPOC diagram to get an overview of a process you work in – and to see all the relationships between suppliers, inputs, outputs, and your customers. Suggestion: If you do this with your co-workers, you'll spark some very worthwhile conversation.

4. Map out your part of the process in detail, then enlist TIMUWOOD to help you pinpoint any occurrences of waste. With one or two of the biggest finds, ask why and keep asking until you come up with a root cause – then do your best within your sphere of control to come up with specific improvement actions. Your last step: Implement!

5. Identify 1-3 key measures that would be useful to you and your co-workers in gauge the effectiveness of your process and the degree to which it delivers what your customers need. For ideas, check out the handout on "key metrics for Lean-powered improvement." Share it with colleagues, so you can pick out 1-3 key measures together. If they zero in on one or two measurements, nudge the conversation to the next step by asking them: "Okay, now how would we go about putting these measures in place and getting real numbers?"

6. Apply the five-why technique to dig deeply into a process-related problem at work. Ideally, do this with colleagues. This is about being more like Sherlock Holmes (taking time to ask questions and analyze) and less like the kind of person who jumps to conclusion and rushes off to action. When you have your root cause, come up with specific action steps to improve the situation.

7. Share the TIMUWOOD handout with colleagues, explain it, reach consensus on one form of waste they believe exists in the process, dig deep to analyze why this is occurring, then come up with specific action ideas.

8. Identify a possible process improvement project, and start building interest, engaging leadership, and doing whatever you can to move the idea forward to the chartering process. Make sure the project idea aligns with the goals and overall mission of your work area – and addresses a high priority. If you are in a leadership role that enables you to serve as the sponsor, great. But more likely than not, you will need to make the right navigational moves early on to get a sponsor.

9. Share this info about Lean-powered improvement with your boss – to spark interest and get them moving on this (or moving even more, if they're already taking action). Plan your approach, and focus on aspects that will capture their attention.

10. If you have regular meetings, think of these get-togethers as a process – and engage the other meeting-goers in a quick effort to think through how these meetings unfold and how they can be improved. Get the group thinking in terms of the meeting flow. If process mapping would help, facilitate the group in putting its meeting process in flowchart picture form. Then get them thinking in terms of "waste" and "value-added activities," even if you don't use those exact terms. However you proceed with this, be sure to guide the group in coming up with one or more specific improvement steps.

BONUS IDEA

Facilitate a small-scope process improvement event with colleagues. Think of it as a mini Kaizen event lasting a half day or a full day, or two half days over the course of two or three weeks. Use it on a small process in which all of you work – and where you have control over how the work gets done. Follow the steps: clarify the start and end points, map the current-state process, pinpoint where there's waste and value-added steps, use the insights to develop improvement ideas, prioritize those, build a future-state process that's within the team's control to implement, calculate key measures that compare the "before" and "after" processes, then build an action plan spelling out "who" will do "what" and "when" to implement the new process.