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### Bringing in a Black Belt to Fight for Efficiency Astor's Experience with Lean/Six Sigma



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James McGuirk, Ph.D

"Do more with less" is a mantra the nonprofit sector has been dealing with for many decades. However, the economic uncertainty, growing capacity issues and ever increasing need for services created by the current economic recession has given this phrase new meaning.



Melinda Weisberg, M.Ed

In 2007, Astor Services for Children & Families chose to face these challenges by implementing a new approach to improving efficiency and performance, ensuring consistency, and enhancing the quality of service delivery. We adopted a process improvement methodology known as Lean/Six Sigma (LSS).

The resulting successes that Astor has achieved and continues to experience in both our administrative and care procedures – as well as improvements in our organizational communication and employee morale -- are ones that can be replicated or adapted by other non-profits of any size.

#### What is Lean/Six Sigma?

Lean/Six Sigma fuses together tools from both Lean Manufacturing and Six Sigma methodologies that have been used successfully in the manufacturing and corporate sectors for years. This fusion helps eliminate waste, increase speed, and improve quality of a process or group of processes. Using the best aspects of Lean Manufacturing and Six Sigma, this methodology offers a balanced approach to realizing better quality faster.

LSS is a model for change and "outside the box thinking". Excuses such as "we've always done it this way" are not acceptable. LSS helps organizations look at their entire operational process, think about each step, and ask questions such as 'what's the value of doing this?' or "why do we do that?'. LSS tools examine how services flow from one step to another and where the biggest problems with waste exist.

#### Why Lean/Six Sigma?

Astor abides by five core values: Respect, Competence, Quality, Leadership and Hope. The philosophy of Lean/Six Sigma reflects all of these qualities - particularly that of Respect for the Employee. The goal of LSS is to make the workplace better.

The roots of both Lean and Six Sigma are in the manufacturing process and gained notoriety by their use in major companies such as Motorola, Toyota and General Electric. Yet, LSS addresses the very "human" process of communication. By using Lean/Six Sigma methodology, Astor affirmed that intra-agency communication is a key element in improving organization-wide processes. Individuals who participated in the improvement efforts felt their opinion was valued and respected and were more proactive about getting involved with implementation.

Astor, like many other community based organizations, has developed numerous cumbersome processes that evolved over time as both the number of our clients and the complexity and diversity of our services increased. Lean/Six Sigma is helping us to remove that waste.

#### How Astor Implemented Lean/Six Sigma

Astor received encouragement and advice on integrating the Lean/ Six Sigma culture from peers in the business community who participated in the regional Institute for Business Innovation (IBI). After evaluating our organizational structure, capacity and needs, Astor chose to bring LSS "in-house" and tailor it to our own purposes, rather than use a consultant-based approach.

With help through a grant from the New York State Department of Labor, Astor was able to send two of its staff members for training in the Lean/Six Sigma methodology. After passing all required tests, two employees received professional certificates in the methodology at basic and/or "Black Belt" levels. These individuals are beginning to introduce and incorporate the methodology throughout the organization by training and engaging other staff as project champions and leaders.

Astor began implementing the Lean methodology in our Hudson Valley Community Based (HVCB) programs with the Medicaid billing process and has seen significant improvement in



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11/01 - 11/30  
Human Services  
Workshops/GSS  
host various  
workshops  
throughout the  
month

11/03 - 11/24  
Starting Your  
Business 101, A  
Four-Week Series  
on Small Business  
Ownership.

11/22  
Mercy Home holds  
its Annual Cocktail  
Party

11/22  
GODDARD  
RIVERSIDE  
COMMUNITY  
CENTER'S 23rd  
ANNUAL NEW  
YORK BOOK FAIR  
WEEKEND.  
GREAT BOOKS.  
GREAT CAUS

11/22  
Mercy Home,  
Annual  
Cocktail/Dinner  
Party

11/22  
PATCHOGUE  
RIVERFRONT  
COMMITTEE  
SPONSORS  
CHRISTMAS  
HOLIDAY BOAT  
PARADE.

11/30  
The Carter Burden  
Center for the  
Aging will host its  
30th Annual  
Awards Ceremony  
& Dinner Dance

12/01 - 12/31  
Human Services  
Workshops/GSS  
host various  
workshops  
throughout the  
month.

12/03  
Housing and  
Services, Inc. (HSI)  
YEAR END  
PARTY.

12/03  
Bedford  
Community  
Theatre's "A  
Christmas Carol,  
The Musical" to  
benefit Food Bank  
for Westchester.

Medicaid compliance. The results were so successful that it became clear LSS could have significant impact on improving quality and organizational efficiency. Since that time we have used Lean/Six Sigma to improve processes that include front office and paperwork flow, our agency hiring process, record storage and senior leadership communication flow.

### A Brief Example of One Project

One of the ways Astor has used the Lean/Six Sigma methodology is to improve its hiring process. The organization chose to focus on hiring because it has high agency-wide impact and involves a diverse group of staff. Astor hires a mix of employees, including childcare workers, cooks, maintenance personnel, teachers, teacher assistants, licensed clinical professionals and many more. We felt involving so many groups would not only improve the process, but also help bring visibility to the Lean/Six Sigma methodology and garner support and understanding.

The objectives of the improvement initiative (called a "charter" in Lean/Six Sigma terms) were to speed the hiring process, improve the quality of the candidates hired, decrease frustration with the process, and improve communication between the individual programs and the Human Resources (HR) department. Ultimately, Astor expects to see improvements in staff retention.

We chose the project's champion from Human Resource Department leadership and conducted a series of LSS current state value stream mappings in each of the agency's four program areas as well as the HR department itself. A value stream mapping is an activity in which individuals who are most knowledgeable develop a step-by-step map of the specific process from beginning to end.

Within these value stream mappings, the organization found some "black holes" in the hiring process, which represented areas for potential improvement. For example, the organization discovered that when responsibility during hiring shifted back and forth between a specific program and HR, the two groups were not aware of each other's activities and actions. This created delays due to lack of communication.

After completing the current state mappings, the organization held a future state mapping activity where everyone involved in the hiring process gathered to design a vision of what the process should look like going forward. As a result, Astor addressed some of the "black holes". For example, to improve communication between the different programs and the HR department, the organization developed public folders on Outlook with information and created a white board procedure so people could actually view where an applicant was in the hiring process. To reduce the number of inappropriate applications, Astor error-proofed the electronic application process (called "poka yoka" in Lean/Six Sigma terminology) and developed screens that would not allow people to complete an application for hire unless particular questions were answered correctly. One of these questions resulted in a 90% drop in applications received from out of the country, which was a surprisingly significant problem for the organization.

### Interested? Where Do You Begin?

To learn more about Lean/Six Sigma, you can begin by reading "Real Lean: Understanding the Lean Management System" by Bob Emiliani or other publications at The Center for Lean Business Management, LLC, Wethersfield, CT -<http://www.bobemiliani.com>.

It is important that agency leadership commit to allocating the staff time and resources necessary to study and train in the methodology. A wide variety of training opportunities are available, including seminars and more in-depth classes. At Astor, we opted for university-based, on-line training courses through Villanova, which offered both certification for staff and a concentration on applications in the service industries as opposed to manufacturing. The programs included basic Lean/Six Sigma as well as the more advanced "Black Belt" course. Trainings ranged from \$2,000-\$4,000 and lasted 8-16 weeks.

You may also be able to find help for the effort. Corporations might be able to share expertise or volunteer LSS Black Belt employee time as an in-kind contribution. Grants to support professional development and organizational improvement may also be available.

Astor's initial investment in Lean/Six Sigma prepared us to deal pro-actively with the financial crisis of the last year both fiscally and through improved staff communication. Astor LSS certified staff presented their work at The Joint Commission's Annual Behavioral Health Care Conference last December and our efforts were recognized in their national newsletter. Feel free to contact [mweisberg@astorservices.org](mailto:mweisberg@astorservices.org) for additional encouragement or advice on getting started!

*James McGuirk, Ph.D is Executive Director/CEO of Astor Services for Children and Families.*

*Melinda Weisberg, M.Ed, is Director of Public Policy and Strategic Initiatives at Astor and a Lean/Six Sigma Black Belt.*



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