

Leading Process Excellence

A Leader's Role in Process Improvement Initiatives



“Leadership commitment and support” is critical for successful process improvement initiatives. But what does this mean? Here are eight steps that leaders can take to support Lean process improvement efforts.

Eight Critical Steps for Lean Leaders

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| 1. Choose where to focus your improvement efforts | 5. Provide visible support for process improvement efforts |
| 2. Define process excellence and set clear goals | 6. Monitor progress and hold people accountable |
| 3. Actively participate in process improvement events | 7. Clear obstacles to successful implementation |
| 4. Assign staff and resources | 8. Recognize and celebrate accomplishments |
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1. ***Choose where to focus your improvement efforts.*** Leaders are critical in setting an agenda for change. Identify the processes you believe are high priority for improvement. Solicit input from staff and customers to identify processes that are in need of attention and to assess where there is the greatest potential for improvements. The processes selected as targets for improvement efforts should be strategic priorities and/or those for which you feel a “sense of urgency” for improving.
2. ***Define process excellence and set clear goals.*** Articulate a vision and goals describing what you believe an excellent process should accomplish. Provide a clear charge to all layers of management and process improvement team members to work towards this vision, making sure that your direct reports understand the vision and deliver consistent messages to staff. Work with Lean teams to set specific goals and a manageable scope for each Lean event. Focus on defining the attributes needed for success and empower the team to develop efficient and effective approaches to accomplish them.
3. ***Actively participate in process improvement events.*** The involvement and passionate commitment of leaders and senior managers is the most important factor in the long-term success of process improvement efforts. Attend process improvement events in their entirety, and invite additional senior leaders to the report-out presentations. Encourage staff to elevate issues that need resolution, and address those issues promptly. Ensure that all participants in Lean events, including delegates of senior managers, are empowered to make decisions and commitments during the events.
4. ***Assign staff and resources.*** Process improvement takes work, but the results can be transformative. Dedicate staff time and money to support improvement events and, in particular, the implementation activities that continue after Lean events to ensure that the new process is implemented as planned and the process improvement gains are realized. Work with managers to ensure that the allocation of staff time and funds is appropriate given the scale of the need.

5. **Provide visible support for process improvement efforts.** Make it clear to people in your organization that you strongly support process improvement efforts, both verbally and through your actions. Write a memo to staff articulating your vision and expressing your passionate commitment to these efforts. Be specific about your vision, your priorities for process improvement, and what you are doing to support Lean improvements. Following an improvement event, lead by example and implement the new process yourself. Actively participate in follow-up meetings after the event, such as 30-, 60-, and 90-day follow-up meetings, recognizing the team's progress and reinforcing the importance of continued implementation. Communicate in writing and in meetings why it is important that everyone in the organization commits to supporting and using the new process.
6. **Monitor progress and hold people accountable.** Identify the metrics and information that you need to understand how the process is performing. Request that managers and teams concisely report metrics and information on key aspects of the process. Use a bulletin board to visibly track process performance and implementation progress. Review metrics and process performance at least monthly or quarterly. Request status reports from managers. Discuss managers' performance in supporting specific process improvement efforts during their performance reviews and as part of criteria used for compensation and promotion decisions, where appropriate.
7. **Clear obstacles to successful implementation.** As new issues and challenges emerge, it is easy to lose focus on the performance and improvement of existing processes. Create time during meetings with managers and staff to discuss performance of work processes targeted by improvement efforts (and not just the issue or crisis of the day). Routinely walk around the office to check in with employees at their work stations and ask specific questions about how the process is working, what support is needed, and what challenges are being experienced. Work to remove barriers. Where barriers cannot be removed, work with managers to calibrate goals and strategies to optimize results.
8. **Recognize and celebrate accomplishments.** The more a leader acknowledges process improvements, the more people will want to deliver them. Recognize accomplishments at staff meetings, in newsletters, and/or on internal or external agency websites. Give certificates and awards to acknowledge individual and team achievements. Support events, such as parties or lunches, to celebrate reaching goals or milestones. Be generous with praise when it is deserved.

EPA Lean Government Contacts

To learn more or to share your ideas and experiences, visit the EPA's Lean Government Initiative website (www.epa.gov/lean/leangovernment) or contact:

Jamie Burnett
U.S. EPA, Office of Policy
(202) 566-2205
burnett.jamie@epa.gov

Kim Green-Goldsborough
U.S. EPA, Office of Policy
(202) 566-2355
green-goldsborough.kimberly@epa.gov