



# LEAN TOOLS CAN FOSTER EFFICIENT CUSTOMER-SUPPLIER PARTNERSHIPS

NHS procurement departments and their suppliers have much to gain from adopting an end-to-end, collaborative approach in their shared supply chain processes, according to **Paula Culliton**, LSS Black Belt and project manager with Cook Medical.

NHS trust procurement teams and their key suppliers are focused on providing the best possible outcomes for patients. A great deal of attention is rightly devoted to developing, and making available, the right products at the right time. However, there is an increasing awareness of the benefits that can accrue when both parties better understand and streamline their respective supply chain processes used to get the product to the patient. Lean methods can be crucial in this regard. These methods focus on identifying problems and understanding them thoroughly so that the solutions that are implemented eliminate waste and every opportunity is taken to add value to the supply chain process.

In early 2017, we adopted a Lean/Continuous Improvement approach to refine how we serve our customers and better utilise our resources. While the ultimate objective is to work more closely with likeminded procurement departments and remove waste on both sides, we recognised that the first step was to implement our own internal Continuous Improvement process.

We started by focusing on one market, bringing together internal process experts and mapping our order-to-cash flow for that market. This involved a Lean tool called Value Stream Mapping (VSM), the output of which was an intrinsic, collaborative understanding, across all teams involved, of where waste existed. We also agreed what our future state for that market should look like. The implementation plan created at the VSM workshop became our roadmap to

achieve this goal. Other Lean tools we have used on our journey include Rapid Planning Events, A3 problem solving projects, and 'Just Do It' improvements.

Our team of Continuous Improvement experts also facilitated workshops utilising Detail Process Mapping, S.I.P.O.C., and Cause and Effect Analysis involving team members closest to problems. The advantage of this involvement is threefold: problems are being solved in a standardised, scientific manner, our team members are becoming more knowledgeable about Lean, and they feel recognised and valued as a result of being asked. The solutions that are created are reviewed by the management team to ensure that they align with our strategic direction.

The overriding objective is to achieve a certain level of standardisation within our processes and sub-processes so that effective measurements are installed. Through effective measurements, you discover where your problems are. You can then analyse them to see what's causing them, brainstorm, and implement effective solutions. This creates the recurring cycle that is Continuous Improvement. At Cook Medical, we are currently in the middle of our first cycle, with some key learnings and improvements implemented, e.g. reducing the time it takes to set up a new customer account.

The next stage is to engage with internal customers within Cook Medical, including sales teams and other functions, to achieve full awareness of what happens in the supply

chain cycle, both upstream and downstream.

The final, and crucial, step would be to forge partnerships with external NHS procurement and supply chain departments who are disposed towards embarking on this shared journey, whereby feedback on respective processes can be exchanged and mutually beneficial operating systems established.

A Lean tool called Voice of Customer is a very useful mechanism to facilitate this step, inviting customers to be physically present at supplier workshops to reflect their needs and priorities. Under this approach, customers are empowered to articulate what value really means for them – what steps they have to take to generate a purchase order, what happens when products are recalled, and so on. In turn, customers can find out first-hand what works for suppliers and what factors influence supplier decisions.

Cook Medical is interested to hear from NHS teams who may be willing to pursue such a joint approach to supply chain management. Not only does this practice make sense operationally, but it also elevates the relationship to that of a partnership. Working together as partners can, without doubt, improve patients' experience.

## FOR MORE INFORMATION

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