

Why applying Lean tools improves multi-agency working

WORKING IN PARTNERSHIP

For a number of years public (and indeed voluntary) sector organisations and agencies have recognised the value of working together to benefit the end user. We have seen the introduction of national approaches, local initiatives and even statutory instruments to encourage and facilitate multi-agency working, with varying degrees of success. Across local government, health, criminal justice and other public agencies, we have seen the development of Local Strategic Partnerships, Local Area Agreements, Crime & Disorder Reduction Partnerships, Local Criminal Justice Boards and many more arrangements to increase co-operation.

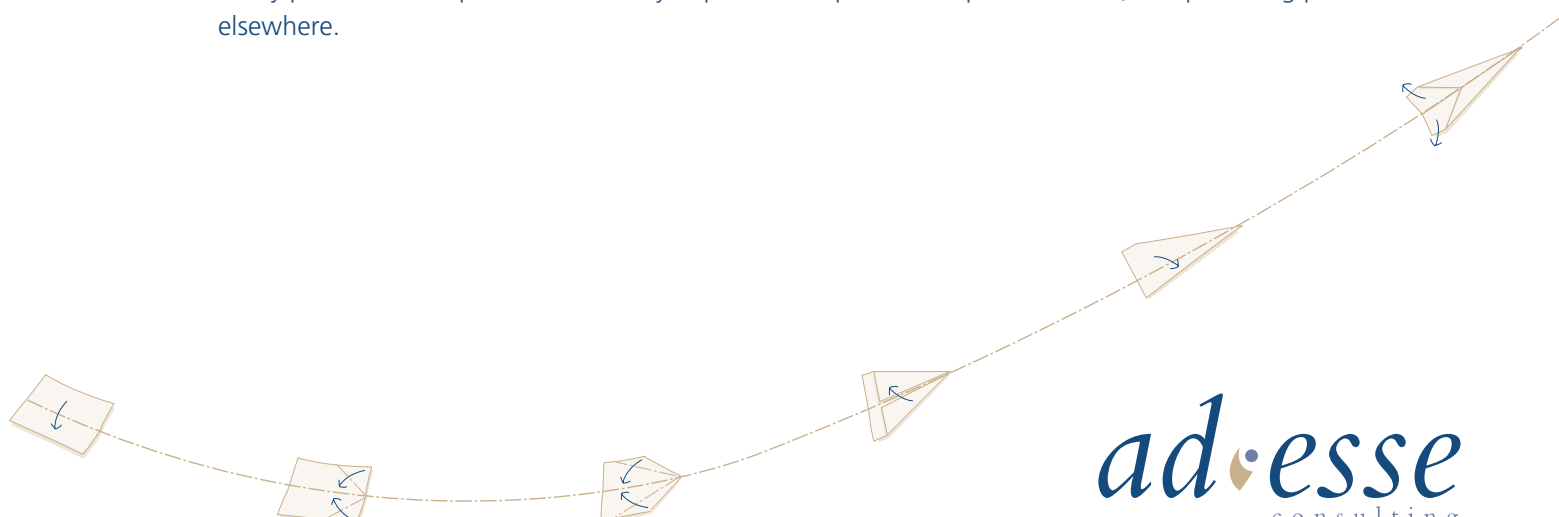
What then is the purpose of multi-agency working? In talking to individuals from partner agencies, we are frequently told it is about 'putting the individual first', 'making sure people don't slip between the cracks' and 'not wasting time and money by duplicating our efforts'.

At a time when public sector providers are under the twin pressures of scrutiny and budgetary reductions, what could be better than an approach to improve multi-agency working by improving service and reducing risk and costs?

THE PROBLEMS

From our work in multi-agency settings, gained over many years, we have made a number of observations:

- Organisations (often responsible authorities) tasked with delivering specific services that do not recognise organisational boundaries may never have had the opportunity to achieve agreement on how and what to deliver
- Multi-agency processes are rarely designed with the end user in mind; the end user often has no voice
- Agencies within the end-to-end process have each designed their part with the best of intentions without realising the potentially detrimental affect on the rest of the process, partners or the end user
- Internal targets and metrics set by one agency sometimes contradict others, therefore organisations pull in different directions
- Some metrics are counter to the overall outcome desired
- In some cases, the decision-makers have not agreed overall desired outcomes, ways of working, or metrics
- Many partners attempt to continuously improve their part of the process alone, compounding problems elsewhere.



Since our inception we have specialised in public sector performance improvement, process improvement and Lean. Based on our work in a variety of settings, we will now describe how multi-agency working can be improved.

In a previous article (Lean implementation v. Lean tools) we described the basics of implementing Lean and applying Lean tools and evidenced the distinction between the two. Generally speaking a full Lean implementation will be easier across one organisation; however, the use of Lean tools lends itself perfectly to multi-agency situations. Our work sometimes focuses on the front end agreement of policy and plans that will be workable and can actually be implemented, but most commonly on improving the efficiency and effectiveness of processes and performance.

GETTING STARTED

Before improvement work can get underway in a multi-agency project all key stakeholders need to come to the table and agree the need. This may sound like basic common sense. However, in our experience, it is also one of the most difficult things to achieve in getting a multi-agency project off the ground. There may be a lead organisation or steering group heading the improvement and it is through this group that the first stage of identification of stakeholders can take place. Successful management of stakeholders fulfils two purposes; firstly to ensure that the right changes are selected to guarantee improvement, and secondly to make sure that those changes can be implemented with buy-in from all parties.

Stakeholder management is important in any project. In a multi-agency environment it is critical. After engagement with senior level stakeholders across agencies we believe it is vital to spend time briefing and explaining the objective and approach (Lean tools; performance management etc) to more junior staff of the involved agencies before beginning any improvement work. The reason for this is to ensure collective buy-in upfront as involvement of at least some partners in a multi-agency project is likely to be voluntary. For end-to-end process improvement to work at its best all participants in the process should be involved. Investing time and energy early in a stakeholder management strategy will pay dividends further into the project.

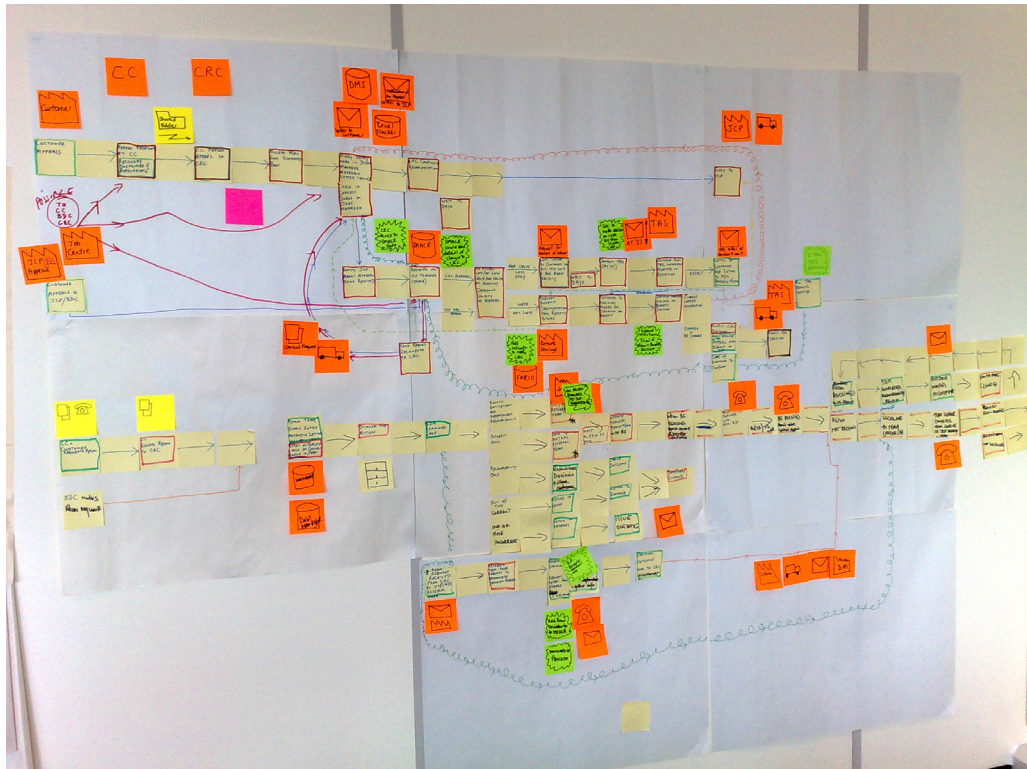
One key stakeholder is of course, the end user. Whilst the end user is not necessarily required for actual redesign of processes (as this calls for decisions regarding internal resources, roles etc), information regarding his or her experiences, hopes and expectations, is important, and should be gathered if it is not already available.

WHY APPLYING LEAN TOOLS DELIVERS RESULTS

The philosophy of Lean is centred on the concept of removing all activity that does not add value to the customer or end user. In the private sector defining the product, the customer and value adding is usually quite straight forward. This is not always the case in the public sector, and can be particularly confusing in multi-agency environments, for two reasons. Firstly the complexity of stakeholders who each have different (and often conflicting) desired outcomes, and secondly, the wide difference between outputs and outcomes. For example, greater public confidence in the criminal justice system is often used as a proxy for measurement of the services delivered by criminal justice agencies. Just what this means at the day-to-day operational level can be confusing. Performance becomes focused on indicators that are assumed to be linked to the overall outcomes. This leads to processes that are designed to meet immediate operational indicators, not what the end user would like. The Lean approach is particularly valuable in that it steps back from each individual process, looks at the end outcome, and then questions each activity to determine whether it adds value to the outcome or not.

Before we begin examining individual processes to determine whether value is being added we need to have agreed a clear definition of what the service is, and what the stakeholders would like. This forum should include representatives from all the involved agencies and data from end users. There is immense value in each partner agency understanding what the others perceive to be the outcome of their work. In this forum empathy can be developed before individual processes are examined. It means that when we do come to look at specific processes within an agency there is an understanding of why they may have developed as they have. In multi-agency environments the discussion around desired outcomes is often lively. It has also often never taken place.

Once the group of organisations, are clear what it is that they are seeking to deliver they are in a position from which they can analyse the effectiveness of their business processes. We can begin to map the processes from end-to-end and then ask of each step in the process: “does this add value to the outcome” and if not, “is it necessary”? It also forms the basis from which we can ask of each activity “how can it be improved”? A key element to applying Lean tools is that representatives from each agency are present for the development and analysis of the end-to-end process.



Lean delivers effective results in large complex multi-agency environments precisely because it uses collaborative techniques, starts with a holistic view and then systematically narrows down into detail. This means that there is no danger of tinkering with one part of the process at the expense of another. Each step is understood both in relation to those steps before and after it and also in relation to the end-to-end process. Lean tools are also effective because they use an approach to performance improvement that contains powerful drivers for successful implementation. The Lean approach does not involve a specialist team identifying problems, solving them and then telling people what they should be doing. The reason solutions can be implemented quickly and sustainably is that they are developed and owned by those who are responsible for implementing them.

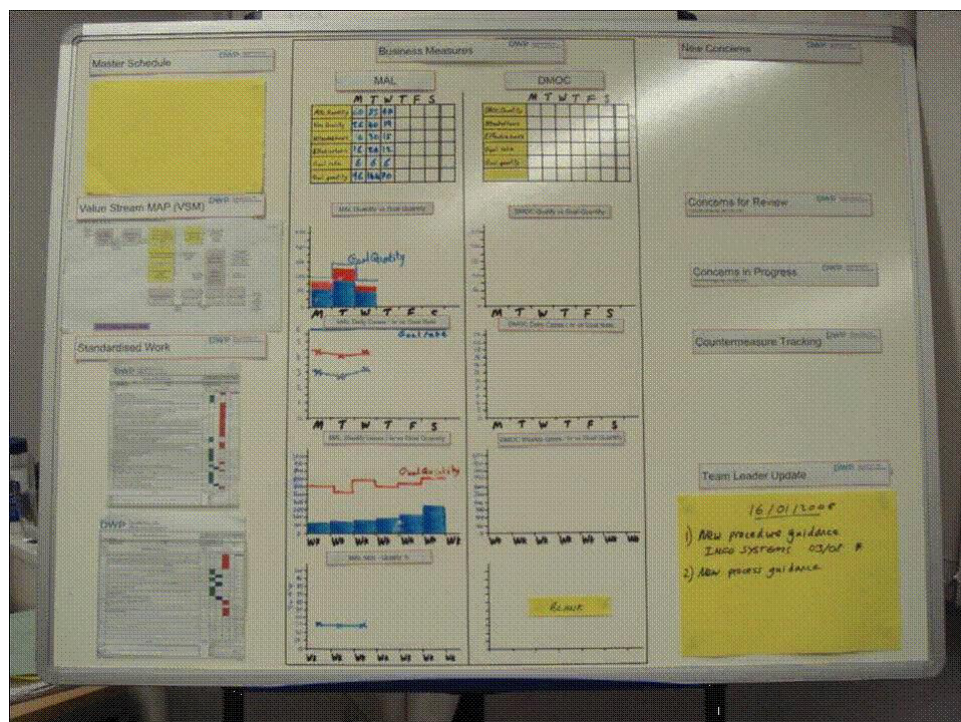
One of the problems faced by all multi-agency work is the silo mentality – “we just do our bit, what they do in partner organisation X is not relevant to us, it is up to them”. This mentality does need to be addressed. The best way to do this is through agreeing overall outcomes and then viewing together how each organisation contributes within the process flow to the outcome. A common symptom of the silo mentality is one organisation complaining about the service levels of another – “there is always information missing, they never return calls etc”. Often this has been the state of play for many years. It is simply, just the way things are. We have seen first hand however how easy it is to change this situation within improvement projects. Feeding information back on the quality of work received between agencies will have a very different impact when both parties know each other personally and both are aware of the actual consequences of the quality issues.

More generally, there are usually substantial improvement opportunities in multi-agency processes around the communication channels and the flow of information. The question agencies need to ask is if we know this is the case, how do we effectively improve the situation? Repeating the same actions to attempt to bring about improvement simply does not work. It leads to an attitude of resignation at the operational level. Applying Lean however does offer an effective intervention in such an environment because it is driven by those who work the operational level. For an example of how Lean techniques can deliver this sort of improvement in an inter-agency environment see our case studies on Integrated Offender Management or Multi-Agency Process Improvement (You can link to these at the end of this article). It is also not uncommon to find different organisations unaware that they are duplicating services provided by others. The exact type of waste found will differ according to the process. However, when looking at processes within an overall end-to-end view, you are guaranteed to find more waste than when looking solely at the sub-processes.

PERFORMANCE METRICS

At the operational level performance metrics should be relevant and focused on those areas that have been identified as containing waste. They should not necessarily be proxy measures for the overall process outcomes. Measuring team performance against the overall outcome can be counterproductive. If a team cannot see the direct correlation between what they do on a week to week basis and the performance measures they are given they will not feel responsible for the measures. For this reason it is better to choose lead indicators that relate directly to the work of the team. A lead indicator is a measure that shows in advance an improvement in the output of a process. Again, developing good lead indicators should be a collaborative exercise. After a team identifies what the significant problems are and develops appropriate solutions they should be guided through how to track and measure improvement going forward.

One of the issues we encounter in terms of metrics is that there are rarely measures of the value of joint working. Creating relevant measures at each stage of the process allows to see not just how well each partner is working, but whether the overall process flows and outcomes are achieved. The use of, for example, information centres, is visible evidence of performance and can be established in each agency setting, or ideally in a shared environment, where possible.



NEXT STEPS

The application of Lean tools per se is not difficult and undoubtedly can provide significant improvements in multi-agency processes. The biggest hurdle is in getting commitment from all relevant parties within agencies from the outset. Where agencies do commit to working together the outcomes of using Lean to look at and improve overall processes has been outstanding. At the operational level the silo mentality dissolves rapidly and genuine excitement about the potential for working together more coherently builds quickly. And the improvement opportunities are well beyond that created by multi-agency initiatives.

By taking a true end-to-end view of a process improvements that drive directly to the outcomes of a process can be identified and actioned in a way that simply cannot be done in a piecemeal approach. As the public sector comes under ever increasing pressure to deliver better outcomes at lower cost, so too does the need to take a wider multi-agency approach become more urgent. The potential benefits of applying Lean tools are too great to be ignored.

Below we provide links to relevant case studies and articles that will provide you with more information. If you would like to discuss this further, please call Philippe on 07843 309165.

Cumbria Public Protection
Safeguarding Children
Lincolnshire CAA
Integrated Offender Management in West Midlands Local Criminal Justice Board
Kent & Medway Crime & Disorder Reduction Partnership



FURTHER INFORMATION

If you would like to discuss this article, if you want to learn more about how Lean can help your organisation, please contact us at seriousfun@ad-esse.com.

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