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Area health systems put customer service first

ThedaCare, Affinity adopt 'lean' mentality to improve efforts

By **MaryBeth Matzek**

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It wasn't the response that Mandy Lowery expected. The Appleton woman wrote a letter to Dr. John Toussaint, chief executive officer at ThedaCare health system, after she didn't have the best experience at Theda Clark Medical Center in Neenah following the birth of her now-2-year-old son.

"I thought I would get a letter back saying, 'We're sorry you feel something was done wrong,'" she said.

Instead, Toussaint wrote back, apologizing and thanking her for pointing out the problems she saw. He also invited her to participate in one of the health system's rapid improvement events designed to look at procedures and processes and find a better way.

"I was floored and very impressed. I went through the process and was just amazed. They looked at the issues and made impactful, fast changes right away," Lowery said.

The rapid improvement event is the main initiative in ThedaCare's lean mentality. While manufacturers have been touting lean and other improvement mantras such as the Toyota Production System and Kazien, designed to improve productivity and lower costs for several years, health care systems are just now getting into the game.

For Menasha-based Affinity Health System, cutting out redundancies and waste has been key since the system was integrated in the 1980s, said Mike Hanson, chief operating officer for Affinity Medical Group. But recently the system has stepped up its efforts and looked for ways to incorporate lean principles in building design.

"We're always looking at ways to improve processes. It's not about the latest buzz word. It's about providing our managers with the tools they need to improve the experience for our



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Betty Jo Balzer, manager of quality for ThedaCare, leads a discussion about quality indicators during a rapid improvement event at Appleton Medical Center. Post-Crescent photo by Dan Powers

A closer look

Five principles of lean thinking:

Value: What are customers willing to pay for?

Value stream: Steps that deliver that value

Flow: How is the value stream organized?

Pull: Triggering flow from customer needs

Perfection: Continuous improvement. A cultural change.

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customers," he said.

The Toyota Model

As CEO of ThedaCare, Toussaint said he saw with his own eyes that the health care delivery system could be improved.

"We have a huge problem in this country with health costs. We want to provide the highest quality at the lowest cost and that is what we're trying to achieve," he said.

"We're here and that's great," he said, holding his hand about neck high, "but the possibilities for us are to be up here," he said as his hand goes above his head. "The possibilities are endless to what we can do."

Toussaint points to an area that most consumers can relate to — how long it takes to be admitted to the hospital. A group tackled the admission process and was able to cut the registration time from 44 minutes to just 15.

"Nurses like that they are now able to spend more time with patients at the bedside," he said. "Why is lean needed? It's because we have to eliminate waste and make the process flow more smoothly as we take out non-value added work."

In 2005, ThedaCare was able to save \$10 million thanks to its lean programs and officials hope to save another \$12 million this year, Toussaint said.

ThedaCare's march toward lean began when Toussaint started looking for a way to improve quality and service while cutting costs. He found what he was looking for in an unlikely place — a factory that produces lawnmowers and snow blowers.

"We went on a visit to Ariens Co. (in Brillion) and were just amazed. They saw a \$12 million increase in cash flow and saw how they redeployed themselves to better serve customers," he said. "I knew that was the model we wanted to follow."

The model Ariens used was adapted from a system put in place by Toyota, the Japanese automotive manufacturer. As part of the system, teams are formed to look at processes and find ways to improve them — whether it's cutting out an unnecessary step or finding a better way to serve the customer.

Michael Speer, senior vice president of human resources, said ThedaCare officially launched its lean movement in the fall of 2003. By the following fall, the company pulled 20 people from various departments and dubbed them facilitators. The facilitators are put in charge of rapid improvement events, which are weeklong gatherings where a team of about 10 people work together on a specific topic.

"This isn't easy. We often go back to the same process over and over again and every time we find a better way and are able to make it more streamlined," said Toussaint, who plans to participate on four teams himself this year.

And what works at one site is not automatically transferred to another location. For example, Lowery and her team worked on improving the care for babies in their first days of life at Theda

Clark. Instead of just putting the new process in place — which includes a new communications sheet posted in the mom's room that keeps track of everything the baby has done such as eating or what shots were given — teams at Appleton Medical Center and New London Medical Center came up with plans for their own birth centers.

Dr. Doug Moard, who practices at ThedaCare Physicians in Kimberly, said seeing the changes brought about by the rapid improvement events has been satisfying.

"One area that we worked on was the holding time for patients. When we started, the average was more than two minutes, but through a series of changes, we were able to get it down to 30 seconds. That was amazing," he said. "This system definitely works. Before, you could meet and meet again for as long as six months before something was done, now it's all done in a week. We're able to make the changes happen more quickly."

Design matters

When designing the new core lab at St. Elizabeth Hospital in Appleton, officials put the lean practices to work.

Gary Kusnierz, director of Affinity Health System's development and construction, gathered together people from both inside and outside of the lab to talk about how the new area should be designed. During a five-day event, every process was looked at and evaluated. The end result? A lab that uses 17 percent less square footage and also reduces the time that it takes to run certain processes, Kusnierz said.

"We were able to reduce lab turnaround by 75 percent, which gets results back quicker," he said. "It's all about cutting waste."

And it's the simple things, said Cecelia Landin, Affinity's director of lab services.

"I talked with the workers and they said one thing that would make a huge difference was if they could have a phone in their pocket so they didn't have to walk back and forth to answer one with a cord," she said. "Through our design, we were able to expand the wireless area so that can happen. We're saving workers' steps and their time."

Kusnierz, who wrote his master's thesis on applying lean principles to health care design, said the team followed both where the specimen goes and the employees' steps through the lab. By doing that, inefficiencies were identified and solutions were enacted.

And the work's not done yet, Landin said.

"We looked at every process. Everything has been changed. We will follow up on the action plans and change them as needed," she said.

Since employees helped come up with some of the changes, they are "right on board. They are the ones doing it so there's a total buy-in," Landin said. "Workers have seen the improvements themselves."

Besides the new lab at St. Elizabeth, which opens in March, Affinity has used the lean philosophy in the design of new clinics in Little Chute and Greenville, Kusnierz said.

"One thing we can't forget is that lean is centered around customer satisfaction. We're trying to exceed what they expect," he said. "It all goes back to our mission and values."

The costs

Change is never easy — or cheap.

ThedaCare, for example, had to figure out a way to pull employees out of their regular duties to participate in its rapid improvement events.

Craig Clifford, administrator of the Kimberly and Midway Road clinics, said pulling people off their jobs to participate is a challenge, but "you find coverage because in the end what we are doing will more than make up for it in the long run."

Participating in the teams has been a great experience — especially seeing the interaction of health care consumers in the process, Clifford said.

"It's great having that fresh set of eyes. It makes us think — 'why are we doing this?'" he said.

ThedaCare's goal is to get every employee involved in a rapid improvement event. So far, 2,100 of the system's 5,000 workers have been involved. In addition, some workers have been on multiple teams already.

"It's all about the buy-in. We want employees to know we value them and we value what they think," Toussaint said.

When deciding if a rapid improvement event is a success, Toussaint said he looks at three areas — improved staff morale, improved quality and improved productivity. "We need to see improvements in all areas for this to be a success, not just the financials," he said.

At Affinity, there are no official improvement teams in place, Hanson said. However, the leadership team recently identified several areas for improvement, such as the phone system and streamlining the patient registration process that need to be addressed in the coming months, he said. Teams of people involved in the process as well as outsiders will then be formed to look at the issues.

"We're going to be pulling together frontline staff as well as managers to look at these issues. We'll have teams where we will identify the problems and then come up with a new process that improves the customer's experience," Hansen said.

Kusnierz said taking lean principles that were formulated in a manufacturing setting and transferring that to the service industry isn't always easy.

"Lean has seen some very positive results globally and locally but when you are introducing these concepts in the service sector, it becomes more difficult. But we're doing it," he said.