

Leading Lean

Shift to a new standard



Health care providers embracing Lean transformation methodologies strive to instill the principles of continuous improvement in operational efficiency and clinical quality amidst their daily operations. A major building block for success is the concept of designing and establishing standard work as guideposts for improved performance—formulating processes and systems based on the best methods identified and implemented over time.

In other industries operated successfully under Lean-based systems, workers almost continuously follow standard work, guided by team leaders charged with ensuring that optimal work processes are understood and followed. When variations from optimal processes occur, managers are trained to respond and coach appropriately, correcting the course back to paths that lead to sustained improvement.

Evolving toward standard work

While best practices exist for some areas of care delivery, the idea of standard work performed throughout an organization has been relatively unpracticed in the health care industry. With only 20 percent of work in health care having clear, evidence-based standard processes to follow, the bulk of overall work components require providers to design and develop processes that work best for them.

Unlike traditional best-practice solutions, Lean-based work design re-engineers processes to perform within the context of each organization's specific situation, identifying issues through first-hand observations and measurements and using input gained from front-line workers closest to the work at hand. Results from Lean initiatives show decisions made closest to where the work is done generally produce better outcomes.

Standard work as a concept in and of itself is not the solution—it still must be designed well. Poorly designed standard work can create inefficiency. Effective Lean-based work design involves identifying and building the organizational capacity to support performance improvement, designing optimal processes to implement it and developing management systems to enable and sustain it.

High levels of variation hinder optimal performance and ongoing improvement. Successful, sustainable improvement requires establishing standard work in areas that don't require variation. Once established, the work can be improved, from one standard to the next.

Buying-in to not opting-out

The path to designing optimal work processes for patient care and business operations is challenging. Health care providers often are faced with overcoming an “opt-out” culture, where a tendency exists for entrenched clinical and business practices to supersede the best practices of standard work. The variations that result can increase the risk for lapses in quality and efficiency that stall the drive for continuous improvement.

Gaining buy-in to standard work—and eliminating variation that impedes its effectiveness—is facilitated when processes are designed to not only identify the right work, but make the right work easier to do. The value and convenience gained from conformance is a powerful countermeasure to the temptation of opting-out to old habits.

Providers choose the Lean route

The redesign of work in accordance with Lean principles is now being applied to nearly every aspect of provider operations. Projects can be as comprehensive as a North Carolina health network's complete redesign of care delivery in nursing units, involving input from a broadly based team of nurses, physicians, clinicians and technicians on improving their interactions with patients. Or it can be as specific as creating a new process for how pharmacy technicians pull pharmaceuticals for distribution to patients, creating solutions that shorten the number of steps walked and reduce time spent in dispensing medications.

Standard work can focus on quality measures such as an Oklahoma medical center's design of a standardized procedure for dressing lines, from physician order through line insertion through radiology, which created a uniform procedure to counter the risk of central-line infections. A Pennsylvania hospital examined the application of protocols to prevent readmissions of patients treated for chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD)—and

improved its administration of those protocols to achieve a 48 percent reduction in COPD readmissions in less than three months.

New work processes can aid the efficiency of the patient care experience and create additional revenue opportunities. A Tennessee hospital's surgery center tackled the problem of excessive wait times for patients in pre-op holding with a process redesign that reduced average waiting periods per case by more than 30 minutes—and the improved efficiency allowed additional case admissions that increased revenue by \$14 million annually.

The concept of Lean-based standard work even extends to controlling costs for planning, design and construction of capital projects for health campus facilities such as emergency departments and specialized care centers—or to supply chain management, revenue cycle operations and information technology.

An Ohio hospital designed a new standardized process for collecting copays and other payments in its emergency department that yielded a more than 1,000 percent increase in cash collections, while a Virginia medical center used Lean-led value stream mapping to design the physical layout of a new hospital to align with optimal work processes, eliminating potential bottlenecks of waste and delay.

Common to all work design initiatives is an emphasis on gathering input from those closest to the daily operations, collecting and analyzing actionable data, engineering a process to solve the root problem, and holding everyone accountable for compliance with the process and its ongoing improvement.

Managing the shift to a new standard

A work design initiative requires strong, sustained management support and a corresponding shift in an organization's culture to meet the goals and objectives of a comprehensive Lean management system. Too often, health care leaders are focused on minimizing disruption rather than understanding optimal work processes and setting expectations for how work should be performed.

The capture and deployment of robust data and analytics help providers quantify current performance levels—and where opportunities exist to redesign and improve processes. It's important to embrace the concept of different types of data—both leading (process) and lagging

(outcomes) indicators.

The introduction of leading indicators to help monitor the performance of standard work—such as standards for environmental and equipment hygiene—helps personnel keep “score” and use ongoing improvement as measures to improve design daily.

To change performance for lagging indicators such as hospital-acquired infections or a patient’s “willingness to recommend,” providers are identifying the steps necessary to affect the desired outcome—then auditing expected performance against actual performance and monitoring daily the percentage variance for improvement.

However, beyond asking workers to adhere to standard work and establishing infrastructure to track compliance, management also must involve staff members in the design of the work, being mindful that “wisdom lies at the front line.” Using Lean transformation principles, managers are assuming more of a coaching role, asking the right questions and reversing the traditional top-down information flow.

To prosper over time, a design must be supported by daily management that facilitates its support and ongoing improvement. Preparing managers for a new style of management system requires a deep look at how their time currently is deployed, eliminating wasteful activities and freeing time to learn new ways of doing things.

Managers at all levels learn how their roles as executives and leaders change to accommodate the work. All-in investment and engagement by the executive team—and the CEO in particular—is critical to successfully designing standard work to kick-start a Lean transformation.

The measures of progress can be as simple as asking a worker, “Did you have a good day, and how do you know?” When standard work is applied, audited and monitored daily, data should be available that show how that day’s efforts measure against what is expected—and that worker, having easy access to that data, should be able to answer with certainty.

Workers invest in their work

Using Lean management techniques, health care workers employing well-designed standard work have established guidelines for long-term success and new data points to reflect on their daily performance—celebrating successes and problem-solving to boost performance levels higher. Managers lend their support to front-line workers in identifying performance barriers in the system and designing processes to overcome them.

Employees who are engaged in the process and driving change in the organization are transitioning from “renters to owners” in their everyday work. And with employees committed to following predictable and proven standard work, patient experience ratings in organizations fully committed to Lean transformation are correspondingly climbing.

The comprehensive Lean model that includes establishing management systems is positioning providers to sustain their gains in quality care, financial performance and patient experience over the next decade or longer. It’s continuous improvement in action.



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