Call Centers Find Natural Companion in Lean & Six Sigma

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Call Center managers swim in oceans of data. Indeed the process of determining what data to evaluate, what signals to regard as important, and when to respond can be one of the most important skills for a call center director to acquire. Sitting in meetings and trolling through pages of reports can be a daunting task. Fortunately, there is a better way.

Lean and Six Sigma methodologies were introduced to the healthcare industry over 10 years ago, but they are only now being appreciated in call centers as an opportunity to bring order to chaos. Lean is a methodology to accelerate processes (like average handle time) by eliminating waste. Six Sigma reduces defects (like abandoned calls due to long hold times), by identifying the most significant variable influencing overall performance. Taken together, Lean and Six Sigma offer call center managers a "toolbox" of methods to take their center to the next level.

Frequently, the first step in utilizing Lean Six Sigma principles in an organization is the application of Value Stream Analysis (VSA). VSA uses process mapping techniques to identify all actions necessary to bring a product or service to a consumer and identify work or processes that the customer does not value (Non Value Added, or NVA). Once this level of insight is attained, the organization can focus in on the work that the consumer does not value and seek ways to minimize or eliminate it. In the call center, some NVA is absolutely essential, such as quality review of calls. Other times, you will find there are processes that have developed over time, or once good ideas that are no longer relevant, that provide no value to the consumer thereby create waste.

Another LSS approach to improved call center performance is to use DMAIC to highlight key business processes. DMAIC (pronounced de-may-ick) is an acronym for Define, Measure, Analyze, Improve and Control. It is an improvement cycle that focuses on identifying and improving those elements that are critical to the quality and performance of your processes. Using DMAIC, an organization is able to identify the elusive "critical X"—that contributing variable with the most influence on your service, and thereby the most benefit when modified.

Understanding the Critical X is essential because of the

volume of data that call centers provide. It is easy for call center managers to go down a rabbit hole of analysis to find they are focusing on factors that have little effect on performance or quality, or no contribution to what the caller considers valuable. This understanding also helps to highlight common-cause variation from special-cause variation. Knowing when this variation is closely related to the normal distribution of performance helps to highlight those special causes that can often be fixed without extensive changes to the overall business.

A healthcare call center used these techniques to identify and reduce variation in performance, and thereby improve the average amount of time patients waited on the phone. By analyzing the steps in work flow, they found a number of calls where the agent was required to check with a supervisor prior to transferring a call to a higher level of care. This often added 1-2 minutes of non-value-added time to the call (there is no value to the caller in being on hold) for a situation to identify the calls when the transfer was not necessary. The call center eliminated this step and reduced handle times by 10 percent, resulting in lower wait times and increased caller satisfaction.

These concepts can be applied to call flow, or even internal processes to improve efficiency and employee satisfaction. At one call center, agents were growing dissatisfied with the amount of time it took from being trained in the call center until they were configured to be work-at-home agents. A cross-functional team was assembled that performed a Value Stream Analysis, and identified a number of steps that were not performing reliably and lacked the consistency of control. Having identified these gaps, management was able to identify the locus of control that could be put in place, and reduced cycle time from 45 days to 30 days.

It was once said that when you implement Lean & Six Sigma, "you may learn some things about your operation that you really did not want to know." That includes the possibility that what you are measuring is not even what the customer regards as important. A large federally-qualified health center retained consulting firm Creative Healthcare to aid them in upgrading their call center to reach new levels of customer satisfaction, a project dubbed "Patient Communications 2.0, or PC2." CHC challenged the organization to rethink their key performance indicators (KPIs), using the Six Sigma methodology of first identifying the "voice of the customer." It was this process, combined with training a core team in the Lean and Six Sigma methods, that resulted in changes to nearly every process performed within the center. It also raised the visibility and potential of First Contact Resolution as a KPI, something never before considered a priority in the call center.

Call centers interested in applying the Lean and Six Sigma methods have a broad array of choices to begin the process of introducing these methods to their organization. The choices are analogous to the make/buy decisions managers routinely face: you can "make" a six sigma quality organization by investing in training, or you can "buy" the expertise from any number of firms that offer consulting services.

The principles of Lean Six Sigma provide rigor and discipline to process improvement. The rigor of the analysis helps the call center leader separate out the signal from the noise in a sea of data, to focus in and call attention to the true improvement opportunities. Furthermore, the discipline instilled in these performance improvement techniques creates a culture of sustained improvement and repeatability. While you don't need LSS to run a good call center, these principles will certainly help you transition to being a great call center. ■