

6 steps to start Lean health care in your practice

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More physician practices are starting to “go Lean,” using management principles from manufacturing companies to eliminate waste, improve efficiency and add value for patients. Learn how to implement Lean methods in your practice.

Lean manufacturing is a philosophy from the Toyota Production System, focused on systematically eliminating waste created through inefficiencies or unevenness in workloads. Although health care and auto manufacturing are totally different, there are important similarities, according to the Institute for Healthcare Improvement (IHI).

“Whether building a car or providing health care for a patient, workers must rely on multiple, complex processes to accomplish their tasks,” an IHI white paper on Lean said. “Waste—of money, time, supplies or good will—decreases value.”

A free online module, part of the AMA’s STEPS Forward website, shows you how to implement Lean

principles in your practice. By engaging your fellow physicians and staff in Lean, your practice can run more smoothly. Here are the six steps to starting Lean.

Identify a high-level champion

Lean requires culture change and therefore requires the buy-in of a high-level person, such as the lead physician for the practice. This person should have sufficient authority and access to organizational resources and should be dedicated to leading the effort.

Create an interdisciplinary improvement team

Members of this team should be from all areas of your practice—reception staff, nurses, administration and other areas. It is important that everyone understands from the beginning that the group’s purpose is to work together toward a common organizational goal.

Empower front-line workers

Successful Lean projects are usually chosen and designed by the people doing the work. Use the AMA’s team improvement idea worksheet to identify everyday problems in the practice and easy-to-implement solutions. The idea is to change the culture to be one in which all team members are empowered to identify sources of inefficiency and innovative solutions.

Choose a starter project

The best way to learn Lean is to dive in. Pick a project that is small but meaningful—for example, decreasing the number of steps in the patient registration process, reducing faxes between different offices or improving inbox management.

Celebrate and spread

Share how you've improved processes with others in the practice to help build a team culture. And if the solution doesn't work, it's not a failure. Your team can celebrate the problem-solving and learning process and try again.

Make the improvement stick

Encourage lasting change by naming the new process and making it part of standard work for everyone involved. Remind staff of the improvement using visual systems that reinforce the new process, such as a checklist or flow diagram that they see at the point of work.

Complete the module on STEPS Forward to learn more details, get answers to common questions and concerns, and access case vignettes about how practices are successfully using Lean techniques to provide better patient care. The module also offers continuing medical education credit.

Here's how to learn more

- | Visit the STEPS Forward website to see the current modules.
- | Check out upcoming live STEPS Forward events.
- | Sign up to be notified when new modules and events are available.