

Kaizen: Value Streams and Blitzes Tools to Improve Government Effectiveness

While the notion of “reinventing government” has been around for many years, getting real results has been difficult. The common efforts to “tinker around the edges”, “cut across the board” and to “downsize” have tended to produce only marginal results.

Kaizen (continuous improvement), in contrast, is a method that has produced significant and sustainable improvement. It combines value stream mapping with blitz improvement projects. The starting questions are, “who are our clients, partners and other key stakeholders?” and, “what provides value to them?” with value being multi-faceted. In the case of an application for a land use, value to the client is timely receipt of the terms and conditions of permission, or reasons for denial. Value to the local community and special interest groups, in turn, is the knowledge that the socio-economic and other impacts of the application have been considered and accounted for in a meaningful way.

Once an organization understands what comprises “value”, it can map out the set of activities that take a product or service from initiation through to fulfillment. Activities are categorized as those that:

- add value;
- add no value, but are necessary given current technology and regulation; and
- do not add value and are not necessary.

By most estimates, the “value” component accounts for only 20% to 30% of the activities in a process! A regulator that recently used this method, for example, found that in a twenty-day review process, there were only about 4.5 hours of activity, of which just over an hour actually added value.

Once the value stream is mapped, a rapid improvement project, or blitz, can make dramatic improvements. In the blitzes, small inter-departmental teams (i.e., between eight and ten individuals) tackle a defined project in a short timeframe (e.g., four to five days) to implement immediate improvements in the process. The teams may also identify longer-term opportunities, but the focus is on changes done “now”.

Improvements are dramatic. Over a four-day period, a provincial regulator achieved a 50% to 60% reduction in time for a technical review, and reduced errors and omissions in applications received by 40% to 50%. With respect to the latter, by rethinking their internal processes and involving the clients, this agency was able to identify actions that made it easier for the clients to “get the application right”.

Where it is appropriate, Kaizen is a valuable tool for government organizations to achieve significant improvements. In the midst of demands for government to re-invent itself, it can achieve changes that matter to the clients, partners and stakeholders of an organization.