

The Leadership Role Trainer Can Play in Creating a High-Performing Government

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There is a story about a conversation between management guru Peter F. Drucker and former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger. Drucker asked Kissinger what expectations he had of his staff. Kissinger told him a story that went something like this: “A new senior staffer I hired a few months ago was about to bring me his first report. I asked him, ‘Before I look at this, is this the best you can do?’ He said no, and went away to keep working on it. A short time later he brought the report back to me and I asked him, ‘Before I look at this, you’re sure you can make this report no better?’ He grumbled, turned around, and left. The next day he brought me the report for the third time and before I had a chance to say anything, he said, “Yes, it’s the best damn report I can produce. I said, ‘OK, now I’ll look at it.’”

There’s something about leaders like Kissinger that, even decades after their time in the sun, we’re still learning from them. Look carefully at this story and three themes jump out. First, Kissinger immediately set the tone for the new staffer about his expectations. And while this may seem minor, it is a critical point as Kissinger was trying to reinforce a culture of high expectations. It often is said that a leader is what they tolerate, and in this case Kissinger made it clear he would expect nothing less than the best. The second theme is Kissinger’s role as trainer. Undoubtedly this was a life-long learning opportunity for the staffer as he quickly realized failing to do his best work the first go-round wasted effort and rework. Regardless of how long he worked for Kissinger, or who he worked for next, it is unlikely he ever delivered a report without it being his absolute best effort.

The final theme is the example and learning opportunity this created for the entire organization. Everyone on the team realized that by having a leader who demands high standards of himself and his team they must have high standards for themselves and their co-workers at all times.

The morale of the story is that regardless of your role in the organization—the most senior executive, or in a training, human resource development, organizational development, or other similar position, you have a stake and opportunity to help create a high-performing organization. Every member of the organization has the opportunity to emulate high standards and influence those they come into contact with.

Of course if it were easy, everyone would be doing it. But training and human resource organizations have additional functions that can help your workforce.

These include the ability to:

- Communicate, influence, and sometimes even set priorities as it relates to what people do.
- Communicate and influence across departmental boundaries.
- Influence the processes by which work is actually done directly from the classroom.
- Involve all levels of team members in collaborative problem solving.

In aggregate, these advantages give trainers the ability to do something very important: shape culture. Certainly there is no silver bullet for shaping culture, however there is a way that can create measurable financial and human performance gains. The best approach is to focus on two areas simultaneously: empower people in the organization to improve the processes in the areas where they work, and to use the Lean Six Sigma methods to help the team eliminate waste and improve quality.

In a nutshell, Lean is a time-based strategy method focused on improving the speed and flow of how work gets done. And how does lean do that? Primarily by removing waste from processes. Six Sigma is about improving quality. Getting something right 99.99996 percent of the time...How does Six Sigma do that? Primarily by removing variation from work

processes. Let's take a look at what can be achieved in government by employing these principles and engaging those involved in the processes.

Imagine a process that takes 28 steps to complete and requires a few weeks, at minimum, for an input in the process to complete its journey to the other side as an output. This is how long it took a purchase order to go from "start" to "approved" in Springfield, the second largest city in Massachusetts. There were too many steps in the process, with redundant tasks being performed by too many people. In other words, there was waste.

As George Washington once put it, "My observation is that whenever one person is found adequate to the discharge of a duty...it is worse executed by two persons, and scarcely done at all if three or more are employed therein." President Washington clearly understood the underlying premise of Lean Six Sigma more than 200 years ago.

Stephen P. Lisauskas, who was until just recently the Director of the Springfield Financial Control Board in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, led the charge to make the purchase order approval process more efficient while, at the same time, deliver higher quality. Fast forward to the end, a process that once took 28 individual steps now takes no more than six steps. And he was able to employ technology to improve the process so everything is now done online. He also noted, "Not only did the improvements pay for themselves many times over by creating efficiencies, but errors and problems in the process have been greatly reduced."

It might be easy to assume process improvement is out of the purview of human resource and training professionals, yet training is a perfect fit. Teaching employees how to see things differently is an underlying principle of culture change. Training professionals typically take on a significant and early role in teaching the concepts and methods of Lean Six Sigma. Their ability to develop the right curriculum, which also can lead to a change in the hearts and minds of those in the organization, is pivotal to success in achieving high performance through these tools.

Beyond classroom training, there is a high-energy, intensive method leveraged in the implementation of Lean Six Sigma called SigmaKaizen. In these four to five day events, employees get an opportunity to reinforce their classroom learning with hands-on application while also delivering real time performance improvement. The "teach-do" approach to SigmaKaizen has proven to change the way employees view the organization and their jobs while also delivering significant improvement in days versus weeks. Seeing employees successfully apply what they learned can be very gratifying.

That's the kind of approach Lisauskas followed, and so did Stephen Chu, Secretary of Energy for the U.S., when he assumed his post in January 2009. When he arrived, he learned that four years earlier Congress had approved the energy department to provide \$80 billion in loan guarantees for private and public sector energy initiatives, but that not one dollar had yet been distributed, and it would take more than another year to get that done.

Having just walked in the door, Chu probably had no idea how the process worked, but he knew one thing—it didn't work well. So he asked a new question: instead of a five-year approval process, what would it take to shorten it to 90 days? By employing the concepts of cross-functional learning groups and collaborative problem solving (concepts that are major components of SigmaKaizen events trainers can lead), he and his teams were able to get money flowing to its intended recipients within the 90-day time frame.

Any organization can do this, and create the best performance possible for their organization. Through transfer of Lean Six Sigma knowledge to employees, and then providing hands on application, trainers can take a significant role in the shaping of a high-performance culture. And now, possibly more than any time in history, is the time.



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