

Evolving Understanding of Lean in Healthcare; A Perspective from the VA Ann Arbor Healthcare System

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Just as organizations in other industries recognized the positive impact and unbounded benefits of Lean Thinking to improve processes and reduce unnecessary waste in daily operations; the healthcare industry has begun its own unique journey albeit much more recently. The depth and breadth of understanding of what Lean Thinking truly means in an organizational improvement culture is a journey; one that each organization must discover and adapt to the expectations and needs of their individual environment. Similarly, the VA Ann Arbor Healthcare System (VAAHCS) began its Lean journey in 2007 and has evolved an understanding and practice of this way of thinking as lessons have been learned and reflected upon.

This presentation will embody three main discussion points. The first involves a brief overview of the Veterans Affairs Healthcare System as a whole; introducing the complexities of both a government-operated institution as well as an academic environment host to numerous students and learners. The second revolves around examples of putting this way of thinking into action in a wide variety of improvement projects. The third will illustrate how our understanding of Lean has evolved over the years and has changed the way we approach improvement work at the VAAHCS with a renewed appreciation for the benefit of being a learner in any environment. Our conversation will conclude with some lessons learned as an Industrial Engineer in Healthcare as well as a summary of the direction improvement work is headed at VAAHCS.

Tom Kerr is the Systems Redesign Coordinator at the VA Ann Arbor Healthcare System and his responsibilities include guiding Lean/systems process improvement initiatives within the health system. Tom received his MPH degree from the University of Michigan School of Public Health and he has held various operations and planning positions within the VA Healthcare System over his 25 year career. His interests include the social and technical applications of Lean and systems improvement methods and principles in the healthcare setting.

Valerie Chase is an Industrial Engineer in Systems Redesign at the VA Ann Arbor Healthcare System with responsibilities for coaching employees at the hospital through process improvement opportunities. Valerie received her MSE in Industrial Engineering from the University of Michigan and has a passion for adapting systems thinking to the dynamic healthcare environment. Presently she is intrigued with the critical nuances presented in the social and psychological aspects of work relationships and how these can be positively developed and strengthened to support an improvement culture.

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