

When you're asked to provide Lean services, your response should unfold in three steps:

ASK	THINK	ADVISE
Ask questions to gather information. Let the process owner(s), leadership, and stakeholders explain the situation and what they want as an outcome. They should do most of the talking. If they talk in generalities, ask follow-up questions to learn specifics. Don't be prescriptive at this stage.	"Seek first to understand, then to be understood." Begin to identify Lean tools and approaches that will work best for the given situation. Don't rush this. Sometimes it takes extra time to come up with the best next steps.	Now <i>you're</i> doing much of the talking. Suggest a specific Lean tool/approach, tell how it works, explain why it's ideally suited for the situation. Present options when possible. Explains what's needed in terms of leadership commitment, action, and staff time to make it happen.

Sample questions:

- What prompted you to contact me? What situation or problem do you need help with?
- How do you know this is a problem? (Look for tangible signs such as customer complaints, backlogs, missed deadlines, etc.)
- *If they have trouble defining the situation:* If you had to describe the situation in just 20 or so words, what would you say?
- *If they come to you with a preconceived solution or approach:* What is it about the situation that seems to make _____ the best approach in this case?
- What are you hoping to achieve? What's the desired outcome?
- How urgent is this?
- Have there been efforts in the past to improve the situation?
- How many people/groups are involved with the issue?
- Does leadership think this is an issue that needs to be addressed? Do some people think it's an issue while others don't?
- What about staff? Do they see a need for improvement?
- How will the workplace culture help or hurt any efforts to effect change and bring about improvement?
- *(If the situation has a process focus)* What is the first step in the process? What is the last step? If we were to map the process, how many steps do you think it would have?
- *(If the situation has a system focus)* What major processes make up the system?
- What data do you have that can provide insights into the process/system and how well it's working?

Crucial tips:

- Don't short-change the "ask" phase. Take time to understand the situation.
- Don't endorse preconceived solutions.
- Focus on processes (not on people).
- Conclude meetings by clarifying next steps.
- Use correct terminology when talking about specific Lean tools.
- When the best solution is unrelated to Lean, redirect to other resources.
- If one meeting is enough, don't have more.
See pages 3-4 for details about these tips.

Red flags:

- Key people have a solution firmly in mind.
- They have a Lean approach in mind.
- They want you to do nearly everything.
- It's unclear whether leadership is committed.
- People are seen as the problem.
- There's a resistance to gathering data.
- The process owner (or another key person) is not in your opening meeting.
See pages 5-6 for more about red flags.

DIAGNOSTIC GUIDE for LeanOhio Practitioners



See page 1 for a
quick-view reference

In the medical world, the best physicians are great diagnosticians. In the world of Lean and Six Sigma, **the best improvement practitioners also are skillful diagnosticians.** They ask about pain points and other surface symptoms, but they look further to find underlying problems and opportunities. Only then do they prescribe actions for improvement.

If you're a Belt-trained Lean practitioner, this guide is for you. It will give you insights, ideas, and tips that you can put to work the moment someone contacts you asking for help with Lean-powered improvement.

■ ASK. THINK. ADVISE.

When you're asked to help with a situation, your three-part response should unfold like this:

1. Ask questions. Gather information about the current situation, the goals for improvement, the underlying motivations for change, the workplace culture, and so on. Let the process owner(s), leadership, and stakeholders talk about why they need help and what they expect in terms of an outcome.

In this first phase, you should be doing only 10% of the talking, and most of your talking should be in the form of questions. (The person who approaches you might be sold on the idea of a certain course of action – say, a Kaizen event. Don't challenge them on this point, but don't validate it either. Rather, stick with the diagnostic approach of asking questions to understand the situation, the improvement goals, etc.)

If the answers to your questions are overly general, ask for specifics. Ask follow-up questions to deepen your understanding.

2. Think about the answers. As Stephen Covey said, "seek first to understand, then to be understood." As you listen and get smarter, you'll begin to pinpoint the Lean tools and approaches that will work best and deliver the most in the given situation.

Don't rush this. Sometimes you can ask questions and fully process the responses in one conversation. Other times you'll want to ask for a second conversation. This gives you extra time to think about the situation, perhaps talk it over with others, and develop possible next steps.

Why this is so important

"Here's what we need to do..."

People will often approach you with a solution in mind. "We want to do a Kaizen event." "We need a process map." "We'd like to 5S our work area." What they have in mind *might* be perfect for the given situation. But only by doing some good diagnostics on the front end can you tell for sure what will best serve the group.

"We need to do something."

In other cases, it will be just the opposite. People will seek your help with the vaguest understanding of their current situation. "Customers are complaining, staff is complaining. We need to do *something* to improve." Here too, diagnostics are crucial. Only by asking good questions can you understand the situation – and determine the next steps that will have the greatest impact.

"Let's get this done asap!"

Other times, you'll hear from someone who has been told to "improve the situation right away." They're feeling pressure, they want to do something quickly, and they want you to help. Here again, smart diagnostics can put a negative situation onto a positive path.

3. Advise. If you ask good questions and reflect on the answers, a recommended course of action will emerge more easily.

At this stage, you're doing much of the talking: suggesting a specific Lean tool/approach, telling how it works, and explaining why it's ideally suited for the situation. You're also explaining what would be needed in the way of leadership commitment, leadership action, and staff time to put the recommended tools/approaches to work.

There will likely be questions, and you'll provide answers. Then your "advise" phase will go further as you suggest a timeline that shows what will happen and when and by whom. You might be involved in these next steps in some cases. But other times the group that approached you will take it from here, or you'll be able to recommend another resource to help out. (The LeanOhio Network includes hundreds of people, so there's a big community of available Lean expertise.)

■ CRUCIAL TIPS FOR MAKING THIS WORK

Don't short-change the "ask" phase.

All of the above can occur in a single meeting – sometimes even in a single hour, when the person who approaches you is pressing for quick action. No matter how rushed you might feel, take time on the front end to understand the situation. You can't become an expert on what's happening from 15 minutes of questions, but you can get a lot smarter, so make the most of it.

Don't automatically endorse preconceived solutions.

If the person who contacted you is convinced of a certain course of action ("We need a Kaizen event – can you facilitate it for us?"), and your read of the situation convinces you otherwise, avoid the temptation to go along with them. This can be difficult if it's your manager or director who's talking. But if you believe that a different approach or tool will work better, then say so – but explain why you've come to this conclusion.

Keep the focus on process.

People are sometimes blamed for performance problems – when the real problem is a complicated, inefficient process. During meetings when people are seeking your help, avoid getting pulled into personnel-related discussions. Bring it back process: "What process are people working in? What parts of the process seem to be sparking conflicts?"

Clarify next steps.

Conclude the first meeting by determining some key details for the next meeting: when it will be, who will attend, and what it will accomplish. Also clarify any work that needs to be done before then, such as gathering specified data or beginning to create a scoping document.

Use correct terminology when prescribing specific Lean tools.

Terms like "Kaizen" and "Kaizen event" are sometimes used interchangeably when they're actually different. "Kaizen" is the philosophy and everyday practice of continuous improvement, while a "Kaizen event" is a week-long (typically) intensive with a clear step-by-step approach for

Diagnostic Guide for LeanOhio Practitioners

transforming a process, building plans for its implementation, and projecting results. Be sure to use those terms correctly. Similarly, if you're going to be helping a group by guiding a process-mapping exercise for them, don't call this a Kaizen event or a Kaizen – call it what it is, namely, a process-mapping session.

Know when to redirect.

Your diagnostics might reveal that people-related issues are indeed the underlying problem – and that process improvement won't help the situation. Perhaps what's needed is conflict resolution or something else that is outside of your Lean skill set. When this is the case, be ready to provide information regarding other resources in state government that can provide the needed assistance.

Know when to wrap it up there and then.

Sometimes during the first meeting with someone who approaches you for Lean-related help, it will become clear that no further action is needed. This can occur for a variety of reasons: the person who contacted you wants to delay action, or they want to talk with others, or your input in that one meeting helped them solve their problem, or others can provide the needed help. Just make sure that everyone in the meeting is aware and in agreement.

■ SAMPLE QUESTIONS

Here is a sampler showing some of the areas you'll want to explore when someone approaches you for Lean-related services.

- What prompted you to contact me? What situation or problem do you need help with?
- How do you know this is a problem? (Look for tangible signs such as customer complaints, growing backlogs, missed deadlines, etc.)
- (If they go on and on but have trouble defining the situation) If you had to describe the situation in just 20 or so words, sort of as a headline, what would you say?
- (If they come to you with a preconceived solution or approach, as in, “We need you to help us with process mapping”) What is it about the situation that seems to make _____ the best approach in this case?
- What are you hoping to achieve here? What's the desired outcome?
- How urgent is this?
- Have there been efforts in the past to improve the situation? (If so, have them describe.)
- How many people/divisions/groups are involved with the issue?
- Does senior leadership think this is an issue that needs to be addressed? Do some people think it's an issue while others do not? (Have them explain.)

Diagnostic Guide for LeanOhio Practitioners

- What about front-line staff? Do they see this as something that needs improvement?
 - How would you describe your workplace culture? How will the workplace culture help or hurt any efforts to effect change and bring about improvement?
 - (If the situation has a process focus) What is the first step in the process? What is the last step? If we were to map the process, how many steps do you think it would have?
 - (If the situation has a system focus) What major processes make up the system?
 - Do you have any data that can provide insights into the process/system and how well it's working?
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■ RED FLAGS

Watch for the following danger zones.

People approach you with a solution already in mind (or even partially developed).

You don't want to facilitate a project that is simply an exercise in implementing an already intended solution. If your opening conversation points to this possibility, explore further.

They have a specific Lean approach or tool in mind.

Ask questions to understand the situation and what they want to achieve. Only then should you shift into prescriptive mode and advise them on the best way to proceed.

It looks like they might want you to do everything.

As a Lean practitioner, you are to serve as a facilitator and guide, helping groups put Lean Six Sigma tools to work. From the outset, make sure your role is clearly defined and well-understood by everyone. On larger improvement efforts, guard against mission creep, in which your involvement slowly but steadily expands to where you're doing most of the work.

It's unclear whether leadership is committed to implementing solutions.

When leadership is seen as lacking commitment to real change, people will be half-hearted in working to develop improvements. Leadership need to be fully on board. This is especially important with major improvements such as process transformations powered by Kaizen events.

Words suggest that *people* are seen as the problem.

If you hear any of the following, ask for more information: culture, low morale, labor relations, us against them, silos. Terms like these can convey the perception that people are the root of the problem – whereas Lean tools are about improving processes and systems. When people use these terms to describe the situation, ask them to explain further but in terms of processes, systems, metrics, and other objective ways. (Example: “You mentioned that these two work units won't talk with each other. Tell me where in the process they interact with each other.”)

There's a resistance to gathering data.

As you focus the conversation on processes and systems, you'll be asking for data. If they've brought some meaningful metrics to the table, great. If they haven't but they promise to gather the needed info, that's great too. If they are unclear on what might be needed in the way of data, but they are willing to listen and learn and gather what you think is needed, that's a good step in the right direction. But if they get defensive at the very mention of data, that's worth a red flag. Explore further to see what their pushback is all about.

The process owner (or another key person) is not in your opening meeting.

Unless there is a good reason for this key person's absence, reschedule the meeting for a time and day when they will be present.

■ EXAMPLES

This ask-think-advise process is all about making sure that whatever actions are taken are the best actions for the given situation. Here are some examples showing how it can play out.

Example: You're asked to help a group develop a customer satisfaction scorecard. But when you ask questions and learn about the current situation, you (and the person who approached you) realize that it's unclear what service attributes are most important to customers. So a better course of action is decided upon: The group is going to organize several focus groups with customers, to learn from the source what is most important to them. You don't have expertise in facilitating focus groups, but you know someone who does – and you put them in touch with the group.

Example: You're asked to help plan a Kaizen event. You begin by asking questions, and you realize that the sponsor is being overly ambitious: the process they have in mind is too big to be improved even in a week-long Kaizen event. You ask more about the system, and it becomes clear from data you've requested that the biggest opportunities for improvement occur in one process in particular. The sponsor ends up focusing the Kaizen event on this process. You're a trained Black Belt, so you can help scope and facilitate a Kaizen event. But this would be your first time in this role, so you team up with a consultant from the LeanOhio Office to lead the event together.

Example: You're asked to help a work unit reduce its backlog. The requester seems panicked and wants the problem solved immediately. As you ask questions, you realize that the small work group has very little time to get together for improvement – a week-long Kaizen event isn't feasible for now. So you recommend a series of well-focused smaller events, starting with targeted training on process mapping and waste (TIMUWOOD), followed by three sessions to map the process, pinpoint waste, decide on high-impact improvement measures, and develop immediate action plans. You pair up with another Lean practitioner and facilitate these sessions together.