

# LEAN LEADER

**“Just jump right in”**

**A LeanOhio interview with Karen Stone**

**Manager of Continuous Improvement, Lean Liaison and Lean Six Sigma Camo Belt at the Public Utilities Commission of Ohio**

*Karen began her service with the State as an assistant to the Chief of Staff at the Ohio Department of Education in 2014. She then transitioned to the PUCO in 2015 where she is currently employed as Manager of Continuous Improvement. Karen earned a Bachelor of Arts in International Studies from Miami University (Ohio) and a post-baccalaureate certificate in Paralegal Studies at Capital University Law School. She acquired six years of experience as a paralegal in the private sector before coming to work for the State.*



**How did you come to connect with Lean Six Sigma in your career?**

Someone on my floor told me he'd be out for a week because of 'boot camp' and I said, 'What is that?' I learned more about it on the LeanOhio website and I put it in my training plan. After attending Boot Camp, I knew I needed to do a project. Going through the training was great, but using the skills was going to really help me understand it and be able to use it in my job. So, I reached out to our Green Belts and asked for help choosing a project and completing the A3. I thought other folks at PUCO who have been through Boot Camp but not completed a project might need help too, so I jumped right in and scheduled meetings with everyone that was in the

Lean Network at our agency.

**Talk about how you maintain connections and engagement amongst your fellow Lean practitioners around the agency.**

We're still working through that. When I came back from Boot Camp, it seemed like there was not a lot of visibility and promotion of Lean Six Sigma, but I was excited about the opportunity there. We have a core group who are passionate about Lean and we stay connected because we're working on the same projects. Right now, we're trying to figure out a good way to get more participation. I took two of our core members out to meet with Lean Liaisons from OOD, Taxation, and Youth Services. These conversations were meant to gather some ideas and get our juices flowing about what we can do at PUCO with our culture in order to create a network of ambassadors willing to say, 'You know, I can help with that. I'm a Lean practitioner.' It was really inspirational to see what these agencies have done, and we gathered a lot of good ideas.

**What were some of the key inspirational takeaways from those conversations with the other agency Lean Liaisons?**

We were all in awe of the Innovation Center at OOD! We were like, 'Whoa! We would love to have a space like this!' (laughs) So those are stretch goals. And what I like about Taxation is that they actually have an Organizational Development Department. We don't have anything like that. Youth Services has a more mature Lean culture, and the liaison provided great ideas on management training, incorporating organizational change management into process changes, and keeping the network active. All this inspired us to launch a Center of Excellence, which will offer Business Process Transformation and Organizational Change Management services for projects and teams.

**You mentioned offering Organizational Change Management as a service at your agency. You were also recently certified by Prosci in Organizational Change Management (OCM). Talk a little bit about the interplay between that and Lean Six Sigma.**

I think if you're doing a big change with your process improvement event, you definitely want to utilize OCM principles to help people make their way to that future state. It can be challenging for certain staff members, and you want to make sure that you take that into account. I think that's what OCM is all about: you're not just grouping everybody into one class of people and assuming one particular communication or one training is going to get everybody ready. Change Management considers different roles and personalities and how they're impacted, and that's important for a big process improvement shift.

**What kind of things drive you to continue to use and promote Lean Six Sigma within your agency?**

I think there are so many opportunities; and so many opportunities to do incremental change and incremental improvements. We don't necessarily need to take five days to have a meaningful impact on some of our workflows. That's really where we're starting: doing some of those simple fixes, like maybe a 5S or just eliminating waste in this way or that.

**You recently served as a facilitator on a Kaizen event that LeanOhio led. Do you have any highlights or take-aways to share regarding that experience?**

I thoroughly enjoyed that experience. I thought it was fantastic to see it from the facilitator's point of view. My big lesson from that: I got to see more of the human emotional side of changing or examining a process. We have a lot of dedicated state employees that are process owners, and they hold it close to their heart. It can be hard to hear people being critical of your parts of the process. I learned that facilitators have a very important role in maintaining that group cohesiveness.

**What's been your biggest success so far in utilizing or deploying Lean Six Sigma at PUCO?**

So far my biggest success has been being a part of a Black Belt project, which came about because we had a staff member retiring who was the only person that did this particular process. He was awesome to work with, and he felt so thankful that someone cared about the work and wanted to see it continue and improve. At his retirement celebration, he gave me a heartfelt thanks for all the hard work that we put into it. So, knowing that some people might have an adverse reaction to their process being dug into and questions asked about it, I hold onto that because it was a very positive experience of someone saying, 'Here's my process, yes I'm open to improving it, and thank you so much for taking the time to care about it.'

**What advice would you have for folks just beginning their Lean journey?**

I think for anyone on *any* journey, my advice is to get involved. Everything that I've been through, even in paralegal training, the advice was always to get involved, find an internship, ask what you can do and how you can learn more. I did that with Boot Camp and with Organizational Change Management by attending every possible Lean event or OCM community of practice meeting. Just jump in and say, 'What can I do to help?' That's how you learn.

**What advice would you have for agency leaders who might be considering adopting Lean Six Sigma practices at their agency?**

I love that question. And this is my response: if agency leaders are involved, I think you're off to a great start. When you have your leader's buy-in, and they promote it and value it, you're going to be more successful. At PUCO, our challenge is that we are doing this as a grassroots movement. And it's very challenging because we have to lay that foundation, get buy-in and work our way up on the buy-in tree. Whereas it's a lot easier when you have the director of your agency saying, 'We love continuous improvement, it is the culture that we want here.'

**Do you have a favorite example of how you've utilized Lean Six Sigma at work or at home?**

Yeah. I use the Five Whys on my kids... they don't like it. (both laughing)

**They accuse you of being too nosy?**

Yes. If I get a response, it's 'Ugh, I already said!' (both laughing) I like getting to the root cause of their thought patterns and their behavior. And it does help when we finally get to the bottom of it. It's like everyone has that a-ha moment. I'd like to say I use 5S all over my house, but I have not made the time to do that. Maybe one day.