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Local adaption and central confusion

Decentralized strategies for public service Lean implementation

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Abstract

The literature on lean, change management and public management presents arguments for implementing public service lean in a decentralized fashion, characterized by employee participation and local adaptations of the concept. This article reports a longitudinal case study of decentralized lean implementation in a large Norwegian public service provider. The analysis evaluates the organization's experiences, pointing to the unintended consequences of difficulties of communication and coordination. We reflect on how public organizations may strike a reasonable balance between centralized and decentralized strategies of lean implementation.

Keywords: Change management; decentralization; implementation; lean; public services.

Introduction

Lean thinking has become a popular approach in Public Service Organizations (PSOs) striving for efficiency, service quality and customer satisfaction (McCann et al., 2015; Radnor and Osborne, 2013). Although proponents of lean promise substantial improvements, the failure rate of lean programmes is estimated to be as high as 90 percent (Bhasin and Burcher, 2006; Liker and Franz, 2011). In some cases, the content of change triggers resistance, particularly when ‘lean’ is nothing but a euphemism for work intensification and tighter managerial control (Carter *et al.*, 2011). In other cases, narrow interpretations and applications of ‘lean’ as specific methods for increasing internal efficiency do not affect customers’ experiences of value delivered (Hines *et al.*, 2004; Radnor and Johnston, 2013). In other instances still, the failure of lean is explained by the organizations’ choice of implementation strategy (Holmemo and Ingvaldsen, 2016).

As a response to these challenges, the prescriptive literature is now advocating a revised understanding of the development of a lean organization. Conceptualizing lean as a philosophy of organizational learning (Hines *et al.*, 2004), lean implementation becomes a never-ending journey of continuous improvement (Bhasin, 2012; Dahlgard and Dahlgard-Park, 2006). Radnor and Walley (2008, p.14) argues that ‘[l]ean works best if driven by all the people, usually through teams, in the organization not just the senior management’. This brings issues of participation, autonomy and local adaption of the core concepts to the forefront (Rolfsen, 2011; Scherrer-Rathje *et al.*, 2009). Traditional strategies of change management, characterized by centralized control and top-down enforcement of predefined solutions (By, 2005), would then be ineffective (Holmemo *et al.*, 2016). An alternative strategy of implementation is where top management devolves authority to lower-level managers (Andersen, 2004) and enables lean to ‘grow’ in the organization through processes of adaption and self-organization (Smeds, 1994). We refer to this as a *decentralized strategy of implementation*.

The literature on lean, change management and public management proposes several arguments that favour decentralized implementation strategies (Andersen, 2004; Scherrer-Rathje *et al.*, 2009; Voet *et al.*, 2014). However, these are largely general ideas that lack empirical testing in the context of PSOs. As recently argued by Kuipers *et al.* (2014), there is a need to ground the theory of public sector change management in more ‘*in-depth empirical studies of the change process within various public contexts*’ (p. 16, italics in original).

This article reports a longitudinal case study of decentralized lean implementation in a large Norwegian PSO, and based on that reflects on implementation strategies for the application of lean in PSOs. As our findings point to several unintended consequences of hampered internal communication and coordination, we proceed to discuss how PSOs may strike a reasonable balance between centralized and decentralized strategies of lean implementation.

Lean implementation in PSOs

Within PSOs, lean has often become the practical solution for meeting demands of delivering more services at a high quality for less cost, which has been the aim of many recent reforms. These reforms have been founded on New Public Management (NPM) ideas, facilitating public organizations' inspiration and adoption of ideas from private sector industries (Christensen and Lægheid, 2011). Analysis from the UK shows that central themes of public sector lean are process-based organization, customer value, waste elimination and employee-driven change (Radnor and Walley, 2008). Both practitioners and academics have given positive reports of lean in the public sector (e.g. Bhatia and Drew, 2006; Suárez-Barraza *et al.*, 2012), but challenges have also been documented regarding the distinct characteristics of service processes (Bowen and Youngdahl, 1998) and the public sector (Scorsone, 2008). The PSO context complicates the meaning of 'customer value', which is too often ignored altogether in favour of a focus on internal efficiency (Radnor and Johnston, 2013).

In response to the high failure rate of lean programmes (Bhasin and Burcher, 2006), the literature on lean has progressed from a technical orientation to a focus on human and organizational issues (Nordin *et al.*, 2012). This has manifested in a twofold development. First, the content of the lean concept has been 'softened' towards 'respect for people' (Emiliani and Stec, 2005), 'continuous improvement' (Liker and Franz, 2011), 'organizational learning' (Hines *et al.*, 2004) and 'building culture' (Dahlgaard and Dahlgaard-Park, 2006). Second, implementation and change management have received more attention. Since a 'participative social system cannot be created by fiat' (Cherns, 1976, p. 785), it is necessary to develop alternatives to traditional implementation strategies that will facilitate learning processes and empower lower-level managers and employees (Andersen, 2004; Hales, 1999). Decentralized change strategies that enable lower-level managers to decide and implement initiatives locally and from the bottom up are claimed to be beneficial for the performance and sustainability of public organization reforms (Andersen, 2004; Voet *et al.*, 2014).

There are several arguments supporting what we may label a decentralized strategy of lean implementation, in which top management establishes some overall concepts and boundaries, but then allows lean to 'grow' in the organization through local processes of experimentation, adaption and self-organization (see Smeds, 1994). First, decentralized implementation puts the competence of front-line employees and managers to good use. They know the local needs and the main problems that need to be solved (Gaster, 1996; Hales, 1999), and they can translate general ideas and concepts into workable local solutions (Scherrer-Rathje *et al.*, 2009; Rolfsen, 2011; Rolfsen and Knutstad, 2007). Second, local participation may be considered a value in its own right, as it democratizes decision-making for both organization members and the public that faces the service providers (Christensen and Lægheid, 2011; Gaster, 1996). Third, participation and autonomy tend to trigger enthusiasm and satisfaction, rather than

resistance to change (Hales, 1999; Voet *et al.*, 2014), and both form premises for a learning organization (Dunphy, 1996).

In the Scandinavian context, two additional arguments support decentralized implementation strategies. First, such strategies would conform to strong institutions of participation and workplace democracy (Gustavsen, 2007). Second, the NPM reforms driving PSOs' lean programmes have the explicit goals of reducing sectorization and bureaucracy and increasing local autonomy in order to deliver more individualized services to the public. Hence, the ideal is the devolution of responsibilities. This has been realized through the institutionalization of vertically oriented performance-based control systems, such as management by objectives and results (MBOR) (Foss Hansen, 2011).

This brief overview shows that a decentralized strategy of lean implementation in PSOs could be founded on a customer-focused conception of lean, principles of democracy, principles of front-line adaptations, the tradition of Scandinavian work life and the vertical devolution of responsibilities. However, empirical descriptions of the implementation processes and outcomes that follow such strategies scarcely appear in the academic literature. Could it be that decentralized implementation creates new challenges in its own right? Theoretically, it is reasonable to expect that decentralized strategies create challenges of coordination and integration (Mintzberg, 1983), but we know little about the specific issues and how they could be overcome in practice.

Research methods

In order to reflect on implementation strategies for lean in PSOs, this article makes instrumental use of a longitudinal case study of a single organization (Pettigrew, 1997). The organization is one of the largest public organizations in Norway, with nearly 20,000 employees and several hundred different offices distributed all over the country. The organization delivers services to a large part of the population by direct end-user contact and case procedure processing. We build on material from recurrent site visits, observations of meetings and seminars, internal documents, external reports, e-mail correspondences and recorded interviews (RIs) in the period from 2012 to 2015. The empirical material is summarized in Table 1. One of the authors is a former consultant who worked with the organization from 2008 to 2010. This enabled us to widen our processual and contextual understanding and helped in recruiting participants.

In analysing the organization's experiences, our goal was to understand the rationale behind their approach to lean implementation and explore its consequences. We were particularly interested in how lean was interpreted and applied in different units and how these interpretations and applications evolved over time. Using NVIVO 10.0, we performed thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006) by coding transcribed interviews and field notes. Due to the large amount of non-interview data in different

formats, we also used notecards and whiteboards to systemize the findings into emerging patterns around the content of the lean concept, context and timelines in the organization. Respondent validations were obtained as part of an ongoing dialogue with the organization, in particular thorough a continuous e-mail dialogue with a key participant in Central (see Table 1) and participants' responses to our preliminary findings at a national seminar.

Table 1. Overview of empirical material.

Sections (pseudonyms)	Description	Data
Municipal	Local office, front-end services.	2 visits: observations, informal interviews with employees, managers and regional advisor (field notes), 2013 1 RI: manager
Back office	Office with a high volume of case procedures. One of the first lean pilots in 2009.	Project manager/operational manager attended RI twice (2013 and 2014), with the section manager the second time.
Service	National call centre completing enquiries and redirecting calls.	One-day visit: observation of steering unit and performing unit, informal interviews with advisors/employees (field notes), 2014 1 RI: advisor and section manager 1 RI: operational manager 3 RI: service employees
Special	National specialized unit providing guidance and specialized case procedures.	Two-day visit: observation, informal interviews with employees and managers (field notes), 2014 1 RI: advisor/project manager
Regional	Administrative unit controlling a number of local and specialized regional offices, including Municipal.	1 RI: project managers/advisors (one the same as in Back Office) 2 RI: section managers, 2013
Central	Specialist unit (innovation and organizational change) within the National Administration Department (NAD).	1 RI: two advisors/project managers, 2013 1 RI: advisor/project manager (same as before), 2014 Participation, observation and informal interviews during two national seminars (two days) in 2013 and 2014 (field notes). Between 68 and 78 participants. Documentation from four national seminars 2013–2014: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Participant lists (role, area, site, lean experience) - Programme, presentations, documentation from group debates/workshops (topics discussed) - Participant evaluation forms (reactions and reflections) E-mail dialogue (37 received e-mails) 2013–2015 and one meeting at a lean conference (2013) with advisor/project manager.

Findings

Before the decision to implement lean, the organization was already in the process of making changes due to a large reform. It was under strong pressure to perform, being scrutinized by both the governing ministry and media. Public press and official expert reports concluded that the organization had not (yet)

succeeded with the reform's goal of adding value for end-users and society. Despite many stories of successful local outcomes, our participants confirmed this overall picture.

The decentralized strategy of lean implementation

The lean concept was introduced in the organization in 2009 as one of several ideas for realizing the reform's intentions. Lean was first tried out through four independent consultant-driven pilot projects in sections with high productivity demands. The pilots made use of related, but different lean methods and tools. After the pilots, internal consultants in Central invited pilot participants to form a common set of methods and tools, and they developed a less detailed, less technical and more adapted version of lean than what the external consultants had originally brought to the organization. The final concept emphasized employee involvement and managers' responsibility for continuous improvement. Tools and methods included A3, group problem-solving, process mapping and visual management.

The following strategy of implementing lean was characterized by extensive decentralization. Regional and local managers were devolved the authority of deciding whether they wanted to adopt the lean concept and how they would implement it. The choice of decentralized implementation was considered important for local ownership and success. In addition, decentralization was thought to be an essential element of the 'lean philosophy', as one of the regional lean experts explained:

There were debates about the content of the plan [the standard methods], which we spent a lot of time and energy on. (...) This is something you see at every [organizational] level, and it is relevant to the lean philosophy. When a superior unit is pushing something over your head, you fight with all your forces. This is how it is all the way down. This is why it is so important with employee involvement and ownership (...) Our managers gave us full support here.

Expert advisors in Central had three main roles in lean implementation. First, they supported the local managers and lean experts on demand. The advisors in Central called this approach 'piecemeal support', an alternative to centrally driven, standardized implementation. Requesting Central's support was voluntary, and several local sections chose instead to hire external consultants or receive help from elsewhere. Second, Central offered lean courses and training sessions, and arranged national seminars for sharing experiences. Third, they collaborated with top management, integrating and consolidating the ideas from lean into strategy documents, the leadership platform and the quality system.

Rationale behind a decentralized strategy

We found that the organization had chosen a decentralized implementation strategy for both political and structural reasons. Devolving authority to local offices resonated with both the currently governing

liberal party's goal of de-bureaucratization and with the previously governing labour party's support of workplace democracy. The impact of the political rhetoric was salient in the organization:

The Minister speaks about an authorized front line (...) I asked him (...):' what do we have to change in our ways to support or instruct, to let them have their freedom to act on their local knowledge and geography? How do we communicate and on what level of detail should the standard routines be given?' (Advisor, Central).

Two important structural characteristics influenced the choice of implementation strategy. First, the organization is complex with several hundred sections of various sizes and professional duties all around the country. Hence, there are large variations in the main problems and tools at hand. Different silos within the organization were impeding the collaboration needed to solve larger issues, involving several units. Problems confined to local contexts (although significant) seemed easier to solve, as a lean expert in Central explained:

This huge organization [has] many different threads that have lived in parallel for long. This might be why we turn our attention to the locals and their daily improvements, and why we believe that we can achieve more by this local focus rather than trying to influence the big issues in [the organization].

Second, the governance systems are also highly complex. Municipal offices report both to the ministry and to the local council. Many of the services the organization delivers are defined by law, public service guarantees and annual governing documents, often with many detailed objectives. Managers regularly have to implement occupational standardized methods to meet the public parity principle. In contrast to these strongly centralized demands on *what* to deliver (recognized as MBOR), managers are given autonomy in *how* to deliver and which methods they prefer to use.

Outcomes of the implementation strategy

There were many examples of positive outcomes of the decentralized implementation strategy. Many of the local managers reported how they had adapted lean as a tool to solve their particular problems and showed positive developments on the related indicators. The extensive freedom of interpretation gave employees and managers opportunities to create meaning and relevance for the lean tools the organization had defined.

The contextual differences made the concept go in various directions. One of the four sections, Municipal, used lean as a tool to solve problems concerning the work environment and absences due to sickness. It showed improvements after introducing standardized processes and regular whiteboard meetings to build teams and share workloads. Service used lean as a way of improving production

control in order to cope with demand variation while retaining the quality of end-user services. Special interpreted lean to be about effective leadership and an organizational culture that would provide motivation for productivity, collaboration and development. Having the longest experience as a lean pilot section, Back Office first standardized processes to increase productivity and later focused on continuous improvement and customer value-chains.

In addition to focusing on local problems, different sections could adapt their versions of lean based on their own previous experiences and standpoints. This is illustrated by the following statement from one of the managers, who translated lean into something different than he had experienced at a former employer:

[Lean] is a word I stopped using ten years ago because it is associated with 'mean'.

The decentralized implementation strategy also left room for innovation, as we found instances of local managers and employees forming their conceptions of lean in collaboration with other local actors, such as industries, educators and peer organizations in the municipalities to improve services to the local community.

However, looking beyond particular local sections, we found challenging aspects of a strategy that facilitated locally tailored variations of the lean concept. Central arranged national seminars that aimed to build bridges between different local islands of lean adoptions, but the decentralized translations of lean created a 'Tower of Babel' effect: the interpretations and experiences were too varied for effective communication and learning to take place. Feedback forms from the seminars documented an overall appreciation of having an arena for exchanging ideas and experiences, and expressed the value of challenging each other's perspectives. Meeting and exchanging ideas with other people engaged in lean was considered meaningful, but required a basis of shared understanding. One manager attending these seminars explained:

Speaking the same language and exchange experiences both ways matters. Not being aliens to each other, but sharing the same reality.

Feedback also showed that the different interpretations of lean led to confusion and frustration. Some participants expressed that they had expected more clarity and support from the top management to help them choose directions and solve problems in their local lean implementations. Instead, they found that they were put together in groups that were too heterogeneous for mutual learning. They had various amounts of experience with lean and presented divergent conceptions and different local problems. Comments like 'This is not lean' or 'I do not understand what we are discussing here' were common. Some expressed disappointment because the discussions were made too basic in an effort to include everyone. The expectations and needs were divergent, but the message to the top was clear: 'Please provide some directions on how lean should be understood and applied!'

Both horizontal and vertical communication were suffering. When confusion arose in the national seminars, Central was not able to clarify the top management's intentions. Managers at the lower levels questioned whether the top management was interested in lean at all. As much as they appreciated the autonomy they had been given, they worried about the top management's laissez-faire attitude, as one local manager demonstrated in the following quotation:

My expectation is that [lean] should have a solid foundation and that [top management] show that this is the method they want to employ for systematic improvement work. However, we have come so far that we are free to design our own systems. It is not that we are dependent on it, but it would have been nice if it was rooted and formalized on a top level as well, to support the local efforts we have initiated.

The communication challenges did not only influence the social climate and learning processes at the national seminars. Horizontal communication is a precondition for collaborating with other units in the service value-chain. Having different focuses and speaking different languages hampered their ability to collaborate. At the same time, the lack of vertical communication concerning lean gave no clarifications or incentives for resolving conflicting goals, as was exemplified by one manager in Service:

There is nothing wrong with the intentions; it is not caused by bad cooperation. We just have different perspectives and methods. We struggle to make them see our picture and for us to see theirs, naturally. [It is hard] to see the general big picture and pull in the same direction (...) It would have been so nice to have a common language and a stronger steering on lean, but we cannot stand still and wait for it. We need to act.

Hence, the local managers focused on issues within their locus of control, improving internal efficiency and the quality of end-user interactions within their segment of the value chain. The units presented a solid *customer focus* in their work and improvement efforts. Nonetheless, without a coordinated value chain, customer focus could only improve segments of the total service process that generated *customer value*. The employees and managers in Service particularly expressed their frustration regarding this. One example was that Service had worked on decreasing the average waiting time on calls and had systematically improved the way it explained the meaning of a statute letter to confused end-users. Service employees saw that the root cause of the end users' problems was unclear formulations in the letters. A more clearly formulated letter would have saved the end users' annoyance and time and simultaneously conserved the resources that Service spent on fixing the problem in repeated phone calls. The standard statute letters were generated in the central ICT and Communication unit, and Service employees had limited opportunities to help improve formulations. One of the managers in Service explained the frustration caused by the lack of coordination between central and local initiatives:

It is not so much about willingness to receive our suggestions when we pass it on in the system,

but there is not enough capacity to execute on those. It slows our work down; we are not on the same page here.

This example illustrates that even with opportunities and channels for communication within the organization, there would be a separate need for coordination and decision-making beyond the authority devolved to the local units.

Discussion

As we expected from the literature on decentralized implementation strategies, our participants reported several beneficial outcomes of adapting lean to their individual sections. Our findings support prior results that management concepts are interpreted eclectically and tailored to fit local contexts through processes of translation, negotiation and learning (Ansari *et al.*, 2010; Benders and Van Veen, 2001; McCann *et al.*, 2015; Pedersen and Huniche, 2011; Rolfsen and Knutstad, 2007). Although every unit, by virtue of having customer focus and using conventional tools and methods for continuous improvement, were doing lean, they were doing lean differently. Many documented lean implementations have only local scopes (Bamford *et al.*, 2015; Pedersen and Huniche, 2011). We would expect these organizations to experience similar challenges to those documented in this study. Comparative studies of different strategies for lean implementation are necessary to further advance our understating of the application of lean in different contexts.

The drawbacks of the decentralized implementation strategy were relative absence of company-wide standards and the perception that top-management direction was lacking. The main contribution of this study is to relate the decentralized strategy of lean implementation to problems of communication and coordination. Previous research has established that these factors in turn are related to two of the greatest challenges of lean in PSOs: piecemeal implementation and failure to increase end-user value (e.g. Hines *et al.*, 2004; Modig and Åhlström, 2012; Radnor and Johnston, 2013). Although piecemeal implementations may lead to local improvements, which are valuable in their own right (Bamford *et al.*, 2015), they typically fail to bring out the full potential of the lean concept as a way of managing value-creating processes that cut across departmental interfaces. Such value creation requires extensive horizontal coordination (Gaster, 1999), particularly as efforts to find locally optimal processes do not necessarily add up to a globally optimal process (Portioli-Staudacher and Tantardini, 2012). Functionally and geographically dispersed silos operate at their best when a single end-user is served by an autonomous and professional provider (Mintzberg, 1983). As the complexity of customer value and public services (Radnor and Osborne, 2013) goes beyond the image of the single service provider and single service receiver, and further, beyond the control span of the single lower-level manager, the lack of coordination between departments becomes problematic. Decentralized lean implementation

reproduces, rather than resolves, this fundamental challenge of coordination. This is highly paradoxical, at least in our case organization, since one of the main goals of the reform that paved the way for lean was to increase the quality of service offered to the end user.

It is noteworthy that conventional explanations of the failure of lean transformation hardly apply to the case organization. Many of our participants present an understanding of lean thinking beyond a tool-based conception (Bhasin, 2012; Hines *et al.*, 2004). It would also be unfair to criticise the management's support and commitment in the units implementing lean (Dombrowski and Mielke, 2013), and customer focus (Radnor and Osborne, 2013) is not necessarily lacking in the organization's lean-related discourses. However, as we have argued, increased customer focus does not necessarily lead to increased customer value unless it is backed by extensive coordination in the service value chain.

Drawing wisdom from the fields of change management and strategy implementation, there is good reason to reconsider the choice of decentralized lean implementation. In organizational change content, context and process are interconnected and should be aligned for successful outcomes (Pettigrew, 1990). The concept of lean in PSOs (content) is founded on a horizontal logic of value creation and coordination (Liker and Franz, 2011), whereas the change strategy (process) is influenced by a vertical logic of decentralization and accountability inspired by NPM ideas (Christensen and Lægveid, 2007). Contextually, the organizational structure of PSOs hardly enables managers to self-organize coordination of their lean conceptualizations. On the one hand, PSO managers are authorized to lead their sections of service-providing professionals in the way they prefer. On the other hand, the formal regulations of end users' legal rights and the performance-based control systems demonstrate a complex mix of decentralized and centralized power (Christensen and Lægveid, 2011; Mintzberg, 1983). Introducing a decentralized strategy to managers who have been socialized in a bureaucratic system will not necessarily make them self-organizing innovators who collaborate with peer managers to expand the total span of control (Hales, 1999).

Conclusion and practical implications

This study has shown that a highly decentralized strategy of lean implementation is not to be recommended in large PSOs. There is a clear need for central direction, coordination and standardization. However, a highly centralized implementation strategy is no better and may even not be an option, as politicians call for less bureaucracy and more devolution of responsibilities. 'Mean lean' without an emphasis on broad participation and respect for the skills of front-line workers fails to promote learning and continuous improvement (Bhasin, 2012).

A large amount of the literature on strategic implementation and change suggests combinations of top-down and bottom-up (Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995), centrally planned and locally emergent

approaches (Andersen, 2004; Smeds, 1994). This ‘both please’ advice is aligned with literature which states that lean implementation should involve everyone in the organization *and* have a clear strategic grip from the top (Bhasin, 2012; Burgess and Radnor, 2013; Radnor and Walley, 2008). Strategies of different developmental phases and competence building have been suggested (Modig and Åhlström, 2012; Radnor and Walley, 2008). Building on those, our suggestion is to start with local problems and learn by reflecting on practice, first locally and later in higher levels of the organization. These reflections should lead to more aligned, standardized practices. In parallel, the organization should gradually move its focus from internal workflow to customer pathways and intra-organizational value chains.

The middle layers of management have essential roles in performing both upward and downward influence (Floyd and Wooldridge, 1997), communicating and coordinating, and should be actively involved in implementation (Holmemo and Ingvaldsen, 2016). The mandate of internal lean expertise could shift from supporting local managers on demand to supporting higher-level managers in leading improvements that demand coordination beyond the control span of the local units. Organization-wide seminars are great arenas for sharing experiences and improving agreed-upon, standard practices. We suggest more frequent and mandatory gatherings also on different managerial levels, where the senior management is present and contributes with interest and clarifications.

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