

# Make 'Lean' part of Rhode Island culture

## KARL WADENSTEN

**G**overnor Chafee has announced that he is accelerating the plan for all state departments and agencies to review and analyze all business regulations. The goal is to ensure that the cost of regulations does not outweigh their benefit to the public.

He has tapped Leslie Taito, former chief executive of the Rhode Island Manufacturing Extension Service, to lead the charge as director of regulatory and quality management at the Rhode Island Economic Development Corporation.

Eureka!

This announcement marks the first time that Rhode Island has officially recognized that there is a better way for us to do business and we can use business best practices, such as Lean, Six Sigma and other continuous-improvement strategies to actually enact real change. These improvement strategies work. It is high time we started using them to make Rhode Island a great place in which to do business. We need customer-based outcomes that help businesses grow while preserving our environment and keeping us safe.

This change must be cultural. As a state, we can no longer accept an apathetic "that's just the way it's always been done" attitude toward business regulation. As a business community, we must support and encourage the actual workers involved in the review process to have a deeper understanding of how each regulation affects our ability to create and sustain growth. We must be thoughtful, helpful and respectful of their efforts.

We are their customer and our voice is critical in this process so we can mutually learn and grow in this collaborative effort. "Let's try it!" should be our mantra to encourage the exchange of ideas and to give rise to creative solutions.

With this announcement, Rhode Island joins just a handful of states that have embraced Lean as a strategy for improvement. Those that have made the commitment (Iowa, Connecticut, Wisconsin, Minnesota and New Hampshire) have already realized great gains and set themselves apart as desirable places to do business. Rhode Island is on the cusp of greatness and needs "all hands on deck" to energize and sustain these efforts. It will take all of us working together — this is not just on the shoulders of state employees.

I encourage all Rhode Island businesses to volunteer some of their time to work with the regulatory agencies and to provide factual, unbiased feedback on the regulatory process and how it affects their business.

We can and should do more to make Lean part of Rhode Island's culture and how Rhode Island does business. To do that, each and every member of our General Assembly and every mayor or town manager should get out and see what Lean is really all about. They need to see the enthusiasm, teamwork and energy of a Lean culture in action and to understand that Lean is based on a fundamental approach to problem solving. They need to see the bottom- and top-line financial impacts of continuous improvement. They need to see that *this* is how we create long-term growth and create the jobs that Rhode Islanders want

and need.

At VIBCO Vibrators, we regularly open our door for plant tours. I challenge all Rhode Island lawmakers and other public officials to contact our office to arrange a visit. And we're not alone. There are a number of great Rhode Island Lean companies — Ferguson Perforating, Monarch Industries, Banneker Industries, the Brickle Group, Admiral Packaging and others — where our public officials can learn.

We are at a watershed moment where we have a unique opportunity to profoundly change how Rhode Island does business. Just as at the dawn of the North American Industrial Revolution at Slater Mill, we should adjust our processes and thinking to adapt to a new business paradigm.

We should use this time to build a culture of improvement where we focus on changing broken processes rather than pointing fingers at people. Our mantra must be "we have good people and bad processes." We should profoundly respect the ideas of those closest to the actual work; stay focused on creating value while eliminating waste; and have the tenacity and guts to tackle old problems with new hope and vigor.

Let's work together to take Rhode Island from worst to first, making it the nation's best place to do business.

Karl Wadensten, president of VIBCO Vibrators, based in Wyoming, R.I., is treasurer of the board of director and chairman of the Making it Easier to Do Business in Rhode Island Subcommittee of the Rhode Island Economic Development Corporation.