



Private or public: lean disciplines mean better services

by **EDWARD HANDYSIDE**, managing director of Forward Vision

THIS ELECTION year will be dominated by a subject that impacts every aspect of our lives: the quality of our public services; the proportion of our earnings that can be justly taken by the State; should be taken from future generations in the form of public borrowing; how many of us can work in the wealth consuming part of the economy before we should start worrying. The subject is public sector waste. Conservatives claim there's £ 35 bn of the stuff. Labour reckon its nearer £20 bn. Though the difference can hardly be dismissed as nitpicking, it's clear that the question of how the public sector can give better value for money will be at the heart of any new government's agenda.

Many will think this long overdue, anticipating with grim relish a day of reckoning for those fed from the public purse. Soon,

perhaps, they'll have to learn that the sky is the same colour in their world as in ours; that investment and expenditure are not two words for the same thing; that real improvement in performance is to do more with the same or the same with less.

But before any of us get smug it's worth noting that waste is something that is all too endemic in most UK organisations, public and private. Despite a few manufacturing jewels that shine bright as any found on the planet, most British factories pale against their more productive rivals overseas, and the high costs and poor standards of our retail, transport, financial, telecommunications and hospitality sectors remain a source of national embarrassment.

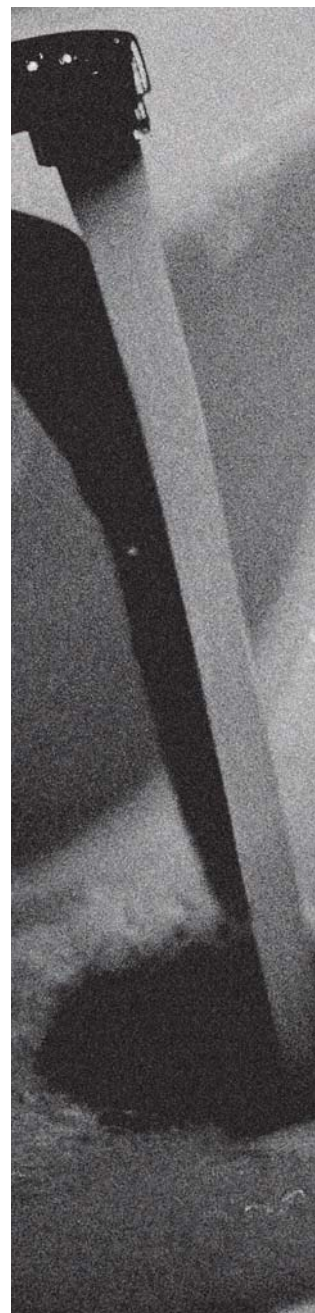
Of those opting to leave these islands; of those many thousands more seeking the means and

opportunity to do so, how many are truly drawn by balmy foreign climes? How many, having glimpsed something better overseas, are simply racked off with the second and third-rate performance characteristic of public and private sector organisations alike?

What many of us hope for is a concerted drive to put service excellence and value for money at the top of the learning agenda; to make these things a national religion and stand some chance of catching up with the rest of the world. Though government must take an initial lead, most of course is up to organisations themselves. Good practice is out there – though it's not nearly as common as many suppose and much of it has little to do with either conventional wisdom or the current passion for political correctness in HR circles.

Contrary to a prevailing mindset equating waste elimination with poorer services, the first thing to grasp is that lean disciplines start and end with a passion for service quality. Awareness of customer need is our template for identifying waste; our means of distinguishing between fat and muscle. Profitable jobs are those that serve customers. Those not at the front line of delivering service must serve those who do; dedicating every effort to providing what they need – everything else is waste.

All employees at all levels in all organisations need to learn what people in the best firms have known for years: that most waste is process and systemic waste and is both identifiable and redeemable; that all downstream processes are customers; that each and every work team needs few and simple measures of performance in quality and delivery; that they need to understand with numbers their performance against these criteria every single day and be expected, by resolving process problems, to perform better tomorrow. For this, we need the highest standards of leadership for our first levels of management so that teams can grasp enough process responsibility to make real and meaningful improvements.



The learning tenets of lean business are entirely transferable to any organisation that has both customers and business processes to serve them. The time is ripe to roll these disciplines out to other sectors and for government to take a lead in such an initiative by starting with those services for which they are nominally responsible and are funded by the nation's earnings.



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