



What is Happening: Planning for the Unknown

by Julie Finnegan and Hannah Thomas

Into The Unknown With Julie

Has anyone ever said “we are going on a trip” to you, but that’s it? Sounds fun, a little adventurous, and definitely exciting. Now plan for that trip without knowing where you are going. Did a thousand questions fill your mind followed by a giant “To Do” list? That’s what happened to me when this exact situation came up about a decade ago. Instead of holding on to the excitement of a vacation I was bogged down by anxiety. I didn’t know where to start. I was paralyzed by the unknown and lacked the tools to break down my questions and tasks into manageable bites. Ultimately, the surprise was ruined and the details of the trip were revealed so I could prepare, pack, and actually make the flight instead of stare at an empty suitcase. Whoops! I chalked this up to my very type-A personality, but as I reflect, I realize it wasn’t because I have a hard time letting go, it’s because I didn’t know how to plan for the unknown.

What Does This Have To Do With You?

If you cannot relate to my story, there is at least a high probability that the scenario above parallels with your current situation. We have all had to stare the unknown in the face these past few months. At first, our reality was “What do I do now? I can’t even wrap my head around what I am looking at!” To quote ourselves at LeanOhio, “We needed to lean on what we know – to lean on Lean.”

Second Verse, Same As The First With Hannah

We have shared a number of Lean tools you can (and should) use to adapt to the new work from home environment, so let’s look at a new scenario that’s rapidly approaching and forcing us to, once again, plan for the unknown: school reopening. We will use the “P” (Plan) in PDCA to break down my current state while remembering to focus on what I can control.

As guidelines are released for the upcoming school year I (along with many of you) am planning for what that will look like in my house, building as much flexibility as possible into that plan so that if/when things change I am mentally prepared to switch gears or tweak my plans. Below are the steps and questions that I am working through:

1. What is my scope? (Scoping is important; making sure you are planning in appropriate scale. Without scope and scale, you risk being paralyzed by the overwhelming unknown.)

Scoping return to school has not been easy. I have found myself with scope creep a couple times now, which is why determining my first and last step is so important. Currently, my first step is “Type of Instruction Determined by School District” and my last step is “First Day of School”.

2. Timeline and Prioritization (What are my deadlines? Identifying what to prioritize while planning is critical so I can address the most immediate problems first.)

Fortunately, the school start date has been established for my “coworkers” which gives me a finite date to have my plan together. The biggest barrier is whether that start date will be in-person, online or a combo of both. Because of this barrier, the participants I identified under point 4 will be vitally important to my planning and I will prioritize getting feedback from them so that I can clear up as many questions as possible prior to the start date.

3. Resources (present/lacking/using to full potential/shared - all are vital to future planning. If a resource is not secured, I am not adding it to my plan. When new resources become available, they will be added for consideration. Working in innovation and flexibility allows me to pivot easily, when necessary, and substitute in resources to stick to the plan).

At first, I felt that I was lacking in resources and I started to feel anxious and desperate. After I took a step back, inhaled deeply (many times), and started to catalogue what resources were at my disposal, the picture was less fuzzy! I was able to identify what I knew, what I was unsure of, and what I had but wasn't tapping into like I should.

4. Participants (Who am I including in my plan? Just my family unit or will I include a select group of others?)

In order to effectively plan, I need to identify who needs to be a part of the conversation. My goal is to operate off the least amount of assumptions possible, so the people who can answer my questions must be involved. If I am planning to have my “coworkers” stay with a family member on designated days, that family member needs to be included in the conversation. Further, my “coworkers” need to be involved so that they can provide their input, understand the expectations, and ask questions (lots and lots of questions)!

Focus In With Us

Have you seen the movie *The Martian*? It's a good movie in general, but one of the lessons shared at the end is to focus on the problem in front of you. Solve that one problem and then the next. And eventually, if you solve enough problems, you get to come home. That resonates with us especially during this time of uncertainty. While our problems aren't as severe as Matt Damon's in that movie, we do need to come up with solutions to new problems every day; problems we never thought we would face. It helps to reframe the way you think about problems more as opportunities. Opportunities for innovation, improvement, and insight.

Whiplash

Thankfully, if this pandemic has taught us anything it is to expect the unexpected. As we were working on drafting this article, there was another change that required yet another re-evaluation of the back-to-school plan. The boundaries had changed, again. As public servants, and lean practitioners, we know that this can happen anytime during our projects. We have to decide if we need to adapt, start over and/or abandon the project all together. Planning in our personal lives does not exempt us from having to make these same decisions when the game changes. The good news is that once you find your bearings, the lean fundamentals are still here, ready to assist you as you plan for the next unknown. You've got this.