Using kaizen to improve faculty onboarding at UNT

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Abstract

Outdated business practices, teams that operated and silos, and a lack of process ownership contributed to an unwelcoming first impression on new faculty joining the University of North Texas. During each hiring cycle, issues were constant and began compounding one another. Due to the lack of visibility in the process, we were unable to see when issues were occurring and address the root of the problems. A third party collaboration was needed to get the university out of its mindset of "this is how things have always been" and introduce an innovative problem solving process. The goal was to streamline the new faculty onboarding experience to provide a seamless transition, reduce issues related to onboarding to account for delays, and provide a customer focused approach to the overall process.

I. Introduction of the Organization

Two organizations participated in this project. Staff members from multiple departments across the University of North Texas (UNT) campus and the UNT System participated. In addition, individuals from the Toyota Production Systems Support Center (TSSC) provided training and facilitation of the process improvement effort.

Established in 1890, the University of North Texas (UNT) is one of today's largest public universities in the nation. A Carnegie-ranked Tier 1 public research university, UNT is the choice of 38,000 students situated in one of the nation's fastest growing regions. Named "the best college town in Texas", Denton is home to UNT and 131,000 people positioned 36 miles north of the Dallas-Fort Worth metro area, which is the country's fourth-largest. Living in a cultural hot spot, UNT has produced such prominent alumni as National Medal of Arts recipient sculptor Jesus Moroles and Grammy-winning singer Norah Jones. Encompassing a 900-acre campus, UNT also lays claim to Discovery Park, which is the region's largest research park in addition to UNT Health Sciences Center in Fort Worth, UNT New College in Frisco, UNT at Collin Higher Education Center, UNT at NCTC in Gainesville, and UNT at Universities Center at Dallas. UNT is able to offer 101 bachelor's, 82 masters, and 38 doctoral degree programs thanks to its 1,900 faculty members which include those that have received nominations for Grammy, Emmy and Pulitzer prizes in addition to many honors such as Fulbrights, Guggenheim fellowships and National Medal of Arts.

Headquartered in, Aichi, Japan, Toyota was founded in 1937 by Kiichiro Toyoda as an offshoot from his father's company. Toyota Motor Corporation (TMC) is a Japanese multinational automotive manufacturer. The ninth-largest company in the world in terms of revenue and with a worldwide employee base of 338,375. Toyota grew to be the world's first auto manufacturer to

reach 10 million vehicles produced per year. TMC is part of the Toyota Group, one of the largest conglomerates in the world consisting of 540 consolidated subsidiaries and 226 affiliates.

The Toyota Production System Support Center (TSSC) is a not-for-profit corporation affiliated with Toyota Motor Engineering & Manufacturing North America, Inc., headquartered in Plano, Texas. Started in 1992 and celebrating 25 years in 2017, TSSC has shared its know-how gained from years of auto-making experience with over 320 small to mid-sized manufacturers, government entities and non-profits involved in disaster recovery, hunger relief, healthcare and more. Based on the philosophies of the Toyota Production System (TPS), TSSC collaborates with these organizations to help them become more productive, maximize available resources and improve quality and safety. TSSC recognized that sharing their knowledge this way helps their partners stay competitive and preserve jobs — or help more people in need — and that benefits us all. TSSC's 15 full-time advisors travel weekly throughout North America and execute 50 projects annually.

II. Statement (restatement) of the Problem/Initiative

The problem addressed by UNT and TSSC was to eliminate the number of "failures" occurring in the faculty onboarding process. During the 2016-2017 hiring cycle, more than 50 percent of the incoming faculty experienced a major issue involving the ability to enroll in benefits, obtain their pay in a timely manner, or obtain required information technology resources. Each year, UNT onboards more than 100 new faculty (140 in 2017) to fill vacant or newly created positions. The process usually begins in the prior Fall with the identification of vacant positions and ends with the start of the following Fall semester when new faculty arrive. Numerous departments participate in the process, including human resources, information technology, parking, key

control and others; however, no overall process owner was identified, and no one had visibility or could exercise control over the entire process.

Due to faculty feedback from the 2016-2017 hiring cycle, the University concentrated efforts on the onboarding process in order to: streamline the experience, provide a seamless transition across functional areas, reduce issues associated with the process, and deliver a customer friendly approach. The issues affecting the onboarding process ranged from an overall lack of process ownership to critical issues affecting research faculty such as the inability to secure space for the faculty member to perform research. The level of complexity was elevated due to a multiple handoffs, which ultimately led to unnecessary steps and delays overburdening the process. With many of the incoming faculty bringing multi-million dollar grants along with them, these issues posed a significant problem for the University. UNT used substantial commitments in recruiting efforts and time to attract these faculty members away from competing institutions, and the onboarding process with its many issues had become their first impression of the University.

III. Design

The design for this project followed the problem-solving template used by the TSSC in their work with other organizations. This process improvement template required several actions including: establishing the leadership, team members and roles; understanding the onboarding process; identifying problems and opportunities within the onboarding process; data gathering; and executing actions targeted to improve the process.

The engagement of the TSSC resulted from a “Shark Tank” style proposal at a university-wide strategic planning session. The need to form a team focused on process improvement was

proposed, and the University's senior executive team approved. Part of the proposal suggested engaging Toyota due to their existing relationship with the University and offer to assist with process improvement. The President and Chief Financial Officer requested the effort begin with the faculty onboarding process due to the problems encountered and need to more effectively transition new faculty into the University.

The TSSC process began with the identification of the key individuals and roles in the process improvement effort. The University President served as the activity sponsor and the Chief Financial Officer served as the champion. These roles were critical in ensuring that the leadership support was in place to provide the necessary resources, but also to ensure roadblocks would be addressed if they became a stumbling point in the process.

The Associate Dean and an Assistance Vice President were appointed as the operation leads for the activity and were critical to ensure the activity maintained focus, accomplished goals, and maintained momentum. They were paired with a Senior Manager from TSSC who would serve as the "kaizen" leader – kaizen taken from the Japanese word for "continual improvement". Their first activity was to gather data and information related to the faculty onboarding process. This resulted in a mountain of documents that were maintained by various business units. In some cases, the documents contradicted each other. It became very evident that silos within the organization existed and there was a lack of ownership of the entire process.

Following the data and information gathering phase, a project team was selected. Key qualities of these team members included the openness to change, respecting the opinion of others, honesty, reliability, positive attitude, and an eagerness to learn. Each team member needed to ensure they could commit time to attend project meetings and discussions, conduct research, tackle problems outside of project meetings, and engage various campus business units where

necessary. Even though the issues they were trying to solve may not have been in their area of expertise or within their area of oversight, this team became the problem solvers. They were encouraged to ask questions and challenge the status quo and were assured there would be no fear of retribution. A key focal point is to ensure that all team interactions occur in a safe environment free of judgement and defensiveness and were empowered to make changes and decisions.

Once all key players were identified, they were all introduced to the TPS concept. For the UNT team members, learning TPS would require more than just following a few steps to success; it would require a completely new way of looking at problems and how to solve them. The TPS foundation is built on building and changing organizational culture. Key elements include the following:

- Technical elements – using TPS tools, methods, and practice correctly;
- Managerial – motivating and developing people;
- Philosophy – customer first, people are our most valuable customer;
- Kaizen, shop floor focus.

The intent of these elements is to result in and enable people development. Developing people, is critical to the overall and continued success of this activity and any future process improvement initiatives.

In order to make sense of the documents gathered from business units and attempt to begin to understand the current process, the project team, operation leads, and TSSC Senior Manager held a four-hour kaizen strategy session to begin mapping out the current new faculty onboarding process in detail, step-by-step. Often a difficult task, one of the key values of TPS is creating a

“safe” environment that encourages collaboration had to be underscored. Assembled to surface and solve problems, the group was asked to focus on the process and not the people performing it. This approach allows for true collaboration and a thorough understanding of the steps, pain points and successes occurring throughout the process allowing the team to improve upon the current condition and create an ideal process flow. Perhaps the key step in this project, documenting and fully understanding what goes into each process step, truly let the team identify what needed to be addressed ultimately shaping how they would proceed with the remainder of the project.

After four hours, the team was left with many questions, and in some cases, were completely puzzled. Many asked “Why do we do this?” and, in some cases, the answer was “Because it’s the way we always have done it”. During the kaizen strategy meeting, the team attempted to identify the potential owner for each step of the process as well as inputs and outputs for each step. In the picture below (Figure 1), you will notice several red circles or “angry red clouds.” They represent potential issues identified during the four hours spent together as a project team. The process mapping was just the beginning of the problem identification step.

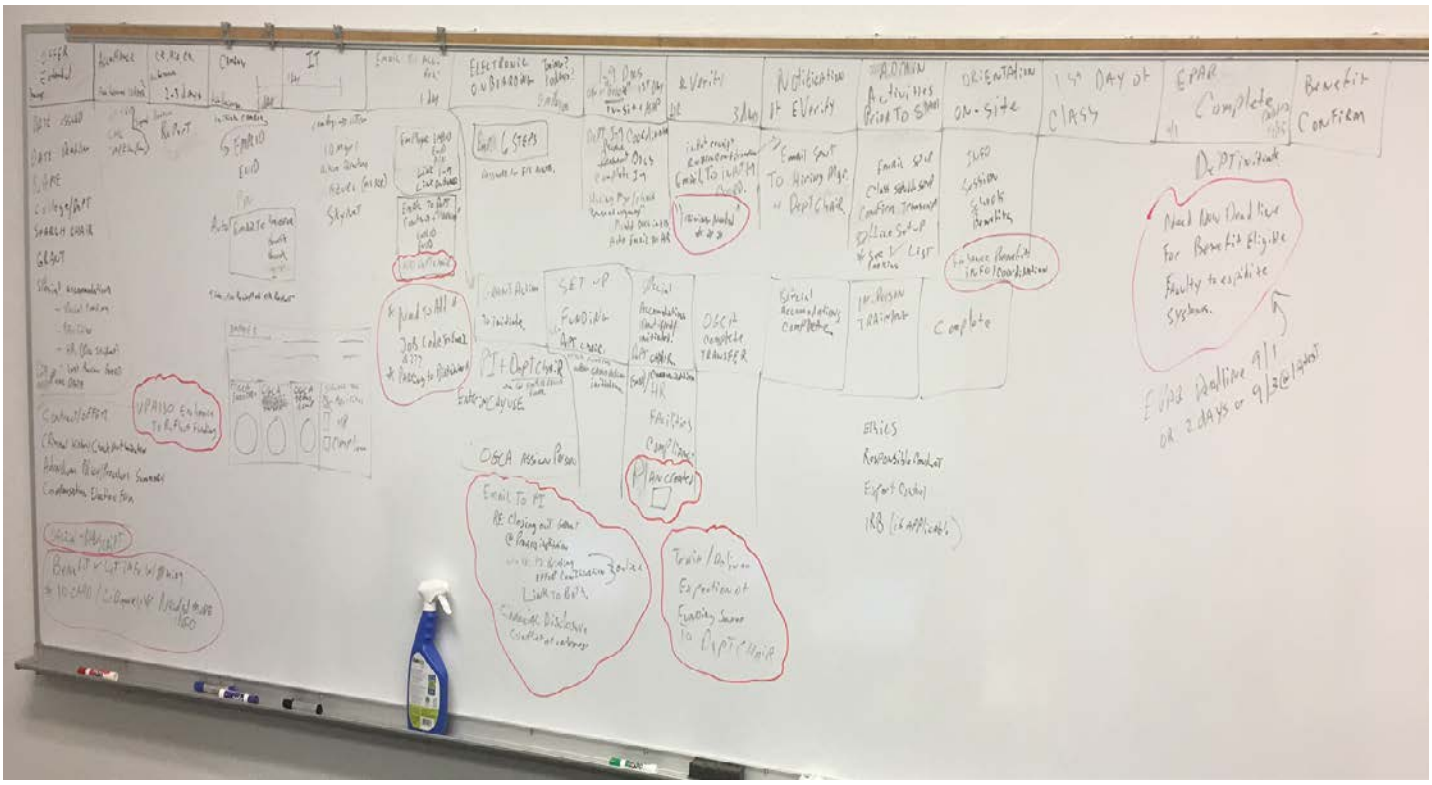

Figure 1. Initial process mapping

Many problems were identified in this initial mapping session but so too were immediate actions that could be taken. For example, one problem was that the university waited until 15 days before the start of classes to begin the entire onboarding process. This short lead time often caused administrative issues and difficulties because of the time constraint. If issues were experienced during the process, neither the new faculty member nor the administrative team assisting them had enough time to troubleshoot issues which later caused many delays. The process owner, who was part of the project team, agreed to a process change while the team was still in the room. This change resulted in the University initiating the onboarding process whenever a new faculty member was offered a position. This change provided longer lead time for the faculty member to complete all of the onboarding actions and obtain complete

information before enrolling in benefits programs. The lead time also provided time for University officials to engage, address any issues, and adjust their processes where needed.

A critical component to the design of the team's work was to gather customer feedback. This feedback was obtained from new faculty members that joined the university during the previous hiring cycle, and other key individuals involved in the hiring process such as administrators, deans, department chairs, and administrative team members. Their experiences and direct feedback provided greater insight into the specific issues encountered by incoming faculty. The operational leaders and TSSC Senior Manager held meetings with each college dean and their department chairs to solicit direct feedback. Another team was formed to gather concerns unique to the administrative support staff. This team shared proposed changes improvements within the administrative group to obtain their opinions and any other suggestions. Making their jobs easier was a key goal and a result of the overall activity.

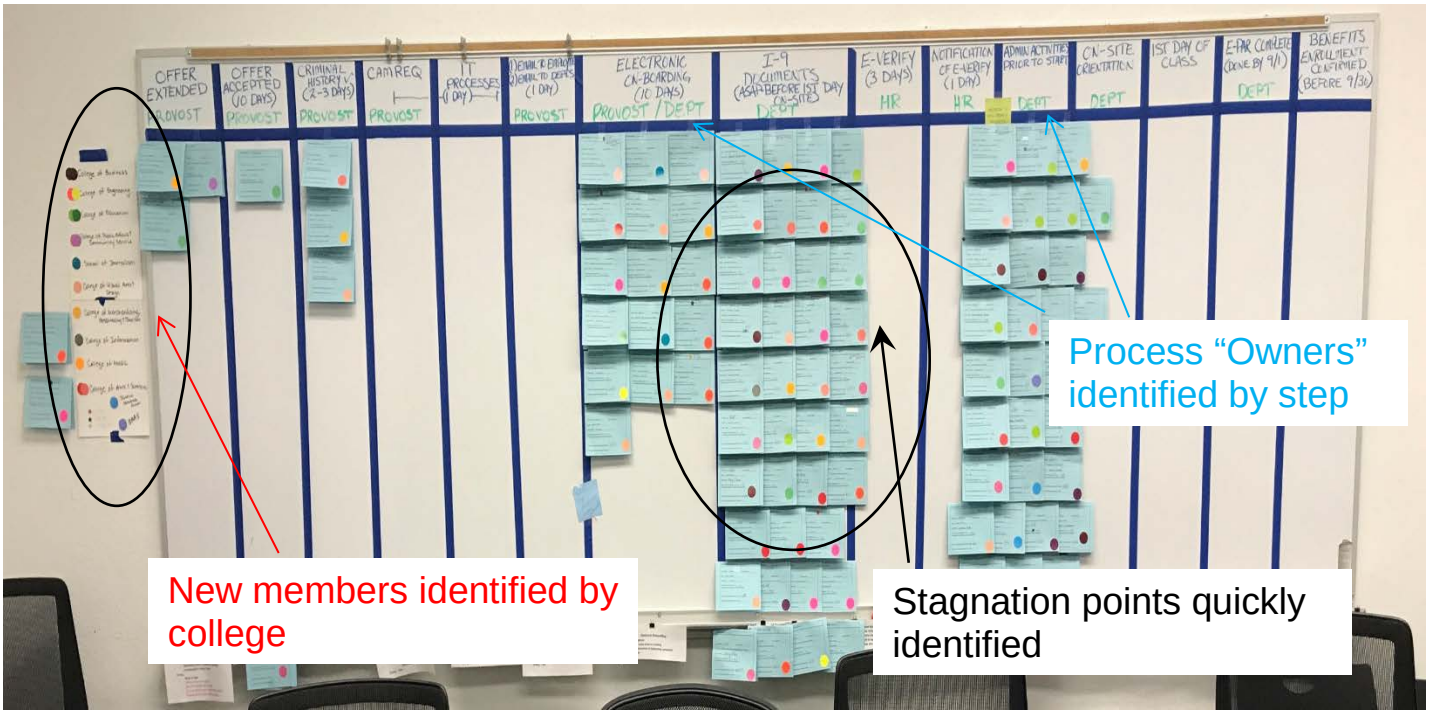

Figure 2. Visual board

With the process fully defined and feedback gathered, the team was charged with developing a tool to obtain the status of every incoming faculty member. To quickly visualize the status, the project team developed a visual board (see Figure 2 above) allowing direct sight into the status of any candidate along with defined lead times for each step in the onboarding process. Many team members questioned the use a white board for visualization as opposed to leveraging the technology resources available to us. The response from the TSSC was: "It's simple, you can close a computer program or shut down a computer, while the white board is always available, accessible, and is updated on a daily basis." Status changes for new faculty occur daily and anyone could enter the conference room to view the board and see the process status at a glance. One key issue identified was the long lead times associated with several actions occurring during the onboarding process. Based on the team members' expertise, a lead [cycle] time was developed for each activity in the process. For example, when offer letters were mailed to faculty candidates, the University never specified when the offer needed to be accepted or declined. This situation often delayed the overall process due to candidates not returning their documents in a timely manner. As a result, a lead time of ten days was assigned to offer letters that were sent to faculty candidates. If that ten day window passed, the process owner followed-up with the candidate to check on the status. The defined lead times not only set expectations, but they also served as a trigger mechanism to alert process owners when an action needed attention.

Following the creation of the visual board, the team tracked every new faculty member, assigned "owners" responsible for each step and quickly identified "stagnation points" in the process—where incoming faculty were awaiting the next step in the onboarding process for long periods of time. Faculty members were easily identifiable due to individually assigned cards (see Figure 3

below) that tracked their movement throughout the process to completion. The cards provided included pertinent information such as the designated college, identified by using a colored dot, in addition to other distinctions date of hire, faculty member name, the need for any immigration assistance, date electronic onboarding was completed, and any special accommodations such as facility needs. Relying on current staff and the TPS practice of improving efficiencies, the only commitment required of any department was that of time and follow up.

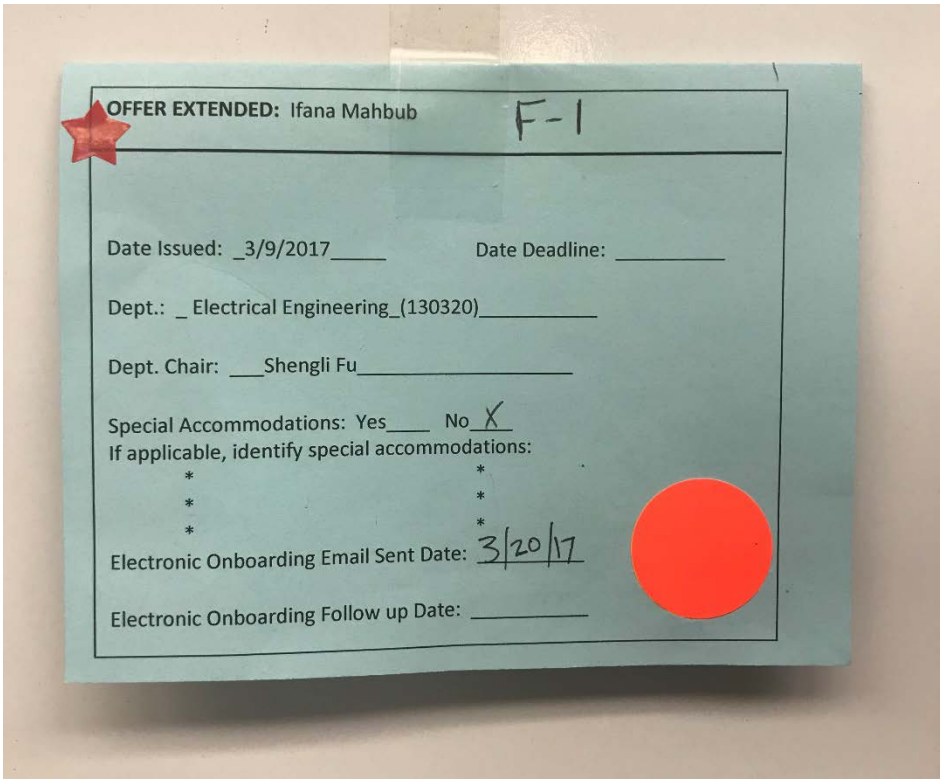

Figure 3. New faculty identification card

IV. Implementation

Implementation of the process included identifying the overall process that existed, understanding and identifying various problems, and exploring and testing various solutions where necessary. The project team was an active part of identifying, assessing, and proposing

solutions to problems. As the team peeled back layers of each process, additional problems began to surface.

The new faculty onboarding process began when an offer was extended to a candidate. Now allotted ten days for a determination on the offer, the Provost's Office follows up with the applicant to ensure a timely decision. Removing wait time, one of the seven deadly wastes of TPS, helped prevent stagnation in the process. Similar to the offer letter stage, incoming faculty members were asked to complete electronic onboarding through an online portal that allows them to complete much of their employment documentation within ten days, again removing unnecessary wait time and preventing stagnation. Tasks such as completing the Employment Eligibility I-9 form, and obtaining a parking pass, keys and university identification no longer required the faculty member to wait until their first day of employment. The I-9 form can now be completed at the convenience of the faculty member since the electronic onboarding has been completed much earlier in the overall process. This action greatly reduced the amount of tasks completed on the first class day for the new faculty member and also reduced the burden associated with multiple faculty starting on the same day on the administrative staff. Transportation Services now proactively contacts the faculty member prior to their start date to ensure they can assist with purchasing a parking permit and assist the faculty member so they know where to park. Increased engagement while alleviating some of the stress normally associated with a first day on campus are the results of these actions.

Since the board (see Figure 2) provided a quick glance of the status of every incoming faculty member and potential stagnation points, the team was able to quickly identify whenever an issue arose within the process. At one point in the process, the team noted a new faculty member did not complete the electronic onboarding portal within the ten day window. On the eleventh day, a

team member followed up with the new faculty member. The contact revealed that conflicting information existed within the electronic onboarding portal and the new faculty member stopped the process due to the confusion. The immediate focus was to assist the faculty member to complete the electronic portal and continue moving through the process. Once completed, the team focused on the cause of the problem. In this case, the electronic onboarding portal had language indicating new employees needed to enroll in benefits at that point in time. However, the intent was only to provide information about benefits. Actual enrollment in benefits programs occurs later in the process. The project team went into action and identified several components of the electronic onboarding portal that required improvements. These changes were assigned to a project team member and action was taken to improve the system.

While it was important to identify where incoming faculty encountered stagnation in the process, it was equally important that the project team ensure changes being recommended and implemented actually occurred. Communication and engagement with various areas on campus were a necessity to ensure processes were implemented, evaluated, and sustained. To do this, someone from the project team or the operational leads would schedule regular discussions with areas that owned a particular process that would impact new faculty. For example, the operational leads met with Transportation Service and Human Resources Benefits representatives monthly to receive status updates related to their team processes that affected new faculty, provide process feedback, and to assess whether or not other problems were surfaced.

V. Benefits

The Fall 2017 hiring cycle has been completed, and the results indicate that the joint UNT-TSSC process improvement effort has been highly successful. The benefits obtained from the process improvement effort include:

- All of the incoming faculty completed their I-9 forms and the other documentation in the electronic onboarding portal prior to the start of class. This action ensured compliance with US immigration requirements and with UNT and Texas policies.
- All incoming faculty had the full amount of time (30 days) from their start date to the Texas deadline for enrolling in retirement benefits programs. Information regarding benefits enrollment was provided to the incoming faculty members prior to arriving on campus multiple times and also at faculty orientation. The primary problem driving issues in the prior year hiring cycle was completely eliminated.
- All of the incoming faculty were placed on payroll by August 31st and completed enrollment in the retirement benefits programs within the 30 day window.
- Incoming faculty members received access to the University's information technology systems within two days from when their signed offer letters were returned to the University. Previously, incoming faculty members often did not have access to classroom technology and email until several days after the class start dates. In Fall 2016, more than 60% of new faculty members complained that they did not have immediate access to benefits or information technology.
- Feedback from the incoming faculty members, their department chairs and deans has been overwhelmingly positive. During the Fall 2016 semester, the University President and Provost were inundated with complaints about the overall onboarding process. Since the start of the Fall 2017 semester, our University President has received zero complaints

about new faculty onboarding. A survey has been conducted to assess the overall new faculty experience. The results of this survey will provide insight into our successes, but also any areas that may need additional attention to continue our journey of continuous improvement. Following the improvements, comments such as "Thanks for all you do to help our faculty" and "This was the smoothest hiring process I have ever seen!" are the norm. Not only has the customer service and engagement of faculty and staff improved, so has the level of quickness turning comments such as "…experience was unacceptable…employees are only afforded two weeks to make crucial selections for benefits, that is not adequate infrastructure to support all the requirements for employees to be able to make choices" into comments like "I am impressed by the responsiveness of the UNT hiring procedures, since various universities I have worked at wait until the week before to send you all the documentation and information to review and complete!"

- New faculty members had the ability to obtain parking permits prior to arriving on campus. They received welcome emails from the UNT Parking Office with parking instructions and information on obtaining permits. The lack of parking information previously caused considerable confusion and frustration upon arrival. The advance information largely resolved these issues.
- Key control issues were greatly diminished. In 2016, many faculty members did not have keys upon arrival which limited access to their offices or lab space. Key control was notified in advance of the incoming faculty members' arrival to ensure keys were available. A new pilot program instituted within the College of Business enabled faculty members to obtain their office keys within the College instead of traveling to the Access

Control Office, greatly reducing unproductive time. This pilot is being considered for University-wide acceptance.

Colleges added enhancements to provide a more welcoming experience to new faculty members. These included dean welcome letters to the new faculty members and College announcements to communicate information about the incoming faculty member so their new University colleagues would be aware of them and also to welcome them.

VI. Retrospect

Now that the activity is nearing the end, the team believes it may have been beneficial to include a dean on the project team. Because the team was unable to identify a process owner for new faculty onboarding early on, it was difficult to see this gap at the time. Initially, the team was unsure how much of the overall process included the colleges, deans, or department chairs. Now, having worked through many of the problems and there is a clear understanding of who owns which piece of the larger process. While all Colleges have been very supportive of the changes, they each own pieces of the process and now must learn why or how that is part of their roles and why it is important. Involvement of a dean may have provided extra support from the academic areas and allowed them to be an advocate for change.

Because of the learning and successes experience, the university is now replicating activities of the TSSC by utilizing TPS within the organization. With oversight administered by the Assistant Vice President of Organizational Behavior and the support of two Business Process Analysts as well as the coaching and assistance from the TSSC, the university is training future kaizen leaders and instilling a culture of problem solving and continuous improvement across UNT. Monthly continuous improvements sessions are held to discuss problem solving activities which helps all members improve their skills and continue to facilitate problem solving training

sessions. The Organizational Behavior team is now leading several other process improvement activities within the university that will result in similar impact as the new faculty onboarding activity.