



## **A shorter path to an asylum decision**

An interview with Marcus Toremar, lean manager for  
the Swedish Migration Board

For a government agency facing intense scrutiny and a dramatic increase in applications, lean management was the solution that let it reduce wait times by two-thirds while meeting budgetary, legal, and policy constraints.

**According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees**, in 2012 Sweden received the fourth-largest number of asylum applications among industrialized countries, ranking behind only the United States, Germany, and France.<sup>1</sup> But Sweden's population is less than 10 million, compared with 315 million in the United States. Proportionate to its population, Sweden's applicant total was second only to Malta's, with that of the United States lagging far behind, in the 24th slot.

Assessing and processing the mass of applications is the responsibility of the Swedish Migration Board, Migrationsverket, a national government agency that oversees other immigration services as well. The board must protect applicants' human rights, comply with international treaties and European and Swedish laws, and conduct fair and accurate reviews, all within the budgetary and staffing constraints that every public body must meet.

Since 2009, the board has been using lean management to help it meet all of these demands. We spoke with Marcus Toremar, the Migration Board's lean manager, at the McKinsey office in Gothenburg, Sweden.

**McKinsey:** *What are some of the constraints that the Migration Board faces as a public-sector organization?*

**Marcus Toremar:** Among the many realities that make a government body different from a private organization is the sustained level of scrutiny we are under from the media, elected officials, external organizations. While we must protect our applicants' privacy, when questions come up about our processes, "no comment" is not our way of working. We comment on everything—we have to, constantly.

It means we have to be very conscious of what we do, to make sure we do it in a good way.

We recognize that scrutiny is just an ordinary part of the democratic process. It needs to be; as an organization, we have a lot of influence over people's lives. We are not like a shop where a customer who gets poor service can go somewhere else. It may sound counter-intuitive, but our awareness of that fact focuses us even more on seeing things from the applicant's perspective.

**McKinsey:** *What led the Migration Board to look to lean management?*

**Marcus Toremar:** Some of the issues never change. For example, we are always looking for new ways to maintain our level of quality so that our decisions are legally correct. That is a given. What we began to notice, however, was that our processing times were becoming longer and longer.

If you ask asylum applicants what they want, they will answer, "A decision, and a swift one." This is universal. They want to know, "Will I be able to live my life in this country?" Nobody likes to wait for months on end for an answer to that question.

Everyone was becoming frustrated with delays—we were, too. Our people did not like having to tell applicants that we still had no decision for them.

**McKinsey:** *How did you try to address the situation?*

**Marcus Toremar:** Originally, we studied other organizations. We would apply one idea to one part of our process and another idea to

<sup>1</sup> UNHCR *Asylum Trends 2012: Levels and Trends in Industrialized Countries*, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, March 21, 2013 (unhcr.org).

## Marcus Toremar



Marcus Toremar, lean manager for the Swedish Migration Board, has served in a variety of management roles for the board since 2007. He assumed his current position in 2011.

Mr. Toremar holds a diploma in sociology from the University of Gothenburg and a master of laws degree from the School of Business, Economics, and Law at the University of Gothenburg.

another part. In retrospect, it is not surprising that the results were inconsistent.

We had heard about lean management, mainly from the private sector. But after trying out other changes and not seeing much improvement, our leadership decided that we had to stop hedging our bets and commit. By that point, lean management seemed worth trying because it was comprehensive. We thought we should at least see if it would work on a small scale.

**McKinsey:** *What convinced you and the leadership that it was the right direction to take?*

**Marcus Toremar:** The results of that first, small-scale test did it. We knew we had to try lean management with real cases, following our real processes, so we started with some newly received applications.

We chose the location of the test with some care. The Migration Board is somewhat unusual in that it is responsible not only for the legal aspects of the asylum process but for most of the practical aspects as well. Our agency therefore

provides housing and related support for thousands of people every year. The logistics can become quite complicated: a person might file an application in Stockholm, but the most suitable housing might be 1,000 kilometers away. To give lean management a proper test, we started at an office that handles the entire mission rather than just part of it.

The new approach cut processing times quite dramatically. It showed that we could resolve a case in three months or even two months, not nine months or a year.

**McKinsey:** *How did leaders elsewhere in the organization react?*

**Marcus Toremar:** We knew they would naturally be skeptical, so we relied a lot on showing them how it worked in person. Leaders needed to understand that the ideas would work for all of our operations.

Our view was that people should form their own opinions, good or bad, about lean management based on what they saw themselves, not on

what others told them. Of course, we knew that the results were strong enough that most would come away with a positive impression. But we suspected that their support would be stronger if we let the leaders come to their conclusions on their own.

**McKinsey:** *In communicating more broadly about lean management, what did you find worked well?*

**Marcus Toremar:** We provided a lot of training, especially to the managers who would be most responsible for making it work every day. But a lot of what worked was simply to be present and take opportunities to communicate as they came up naturally. If I heard someone in the hallway express a concern, I would start a conversation right there to address the issue.

Among some employees, there was fear of change. We have strong unions in Sweden, so we made sure to involve union representatives in our workshops, which underscored that the changes would be good for workers as well.

**McKinsey:** *How did the Migration Board adapt lean-management concepts to its internal culture?*

**Marcus Toremar:** At the beginning, we limited our adaptation. During the first couple of years, we intentionally used English terms such as “lean” so that people could look them up on the Internet and become more comfortable with them. Over time, we have started to modify the way we present the ideas so that they feel more like a reflection of our values rather than an outside system. The transition has not been easy; the terminology has to feel honest and authentic.

We keep revising our training as well, so that it reflects what our people are doing in their jobs right now. The examples we give are all based on actual problems that our managers and employees are seeing.

**McKinsey:** *Which changes surprised you the most? What can the organization do now that it couldn't before?*

**Marcus Toremar:** Our flexibility is so much greater now. Last year, we processed over 36,000 applications, which was roughly twice what we were expecting. It put a huge strain on the organization, but we were able to absorb them without any increase in our budget or staff. In fact, we reduced the average decision time from 149 days to 108. To put those numbers in perspective, 2008 was another very busy year, with almost 34,000 applications processed. But we were not using lean management then, and an average application took over 270 days to finish.

Previously, people tended to focus on their own caseload. Now, when the Migration Board is busy, many of them are starting to wonder if their caseload is the most important thing that they should be doing—whether they need to put it aside and work on something that is a higher priority for the authority as a whole. That is a huge change for us.

**McKinsey:** *What effect has lean management had on the organization's strategic direction?*

**Marcus Toremar:** For me, lean management alone cannot provide us with direction. Instead, it helps us navigate in the direction that our leaders have chosen. I think of lean management as a compass. A compass does not choose a direction, and it cannot guarantee that you will

arrive at a certain point. But it does increase your chances.

**McKinsey:** *How did lean management change the way you and your peers lead?*

**Marcus Toremar:** It did in many ways. Historically, we have always relied heavily on experts—on lawyers, for example. Like many organizations, we promoted people because of their expertise. But we know that being the best lawyer does not make you the best manager. We now realize that much of what we are doing centers on helping our experts become better managers. It's a lot of work, but I think it will be one of the most important benefits from our transformation.

We are much better about making sure that our decisions have a strong factual basis. Our best leaders now listen to their colleagues; they don't just make quick recommendations based on how things were when they were asylum officers eight or ten years ago.

Some of the changes seem small, but they turn out to be quite important. For example, “go and see”—the idea that leaders and managers must physically go and see what is happening in

their units—has had a major impact. To make that work, we had to divide our units into smaller teams; it would have been impossible for a manager of 50 people to understand what all of those colleagues were doing. Now the manager can rely on the team leaders to handle that day-to-day oversight.

We then discovered that the new structure makes it much easier to bring new staff on board. In a 50-person unit, recent hires could easily feel lost. Now they can learn much more quickly.

**McKinsey:** *What are the transformation's next horizons?*

**Marcus Toremar:** We will certainly need to keep increasing our quality and efficiency, because we think that the expectations for the Migration Board will likely increase. We want to be prepared for new pressures. Much of the world has been through one financial crisis; we know from looking at other governments that even in good times, refugee and asylum matters are not an area that easily attracts funding.

That is why we have assembled a strong core group of people who are well trained in lean ideas, some of whom came to us from the private



sector. They will help us keep pushing. We know that we need to extend into other areas, to break down internal barriers.

It's an enormous task to change the behavior of 4,000 people, and we cannot let our guard down. We constantly keep questioning ourselves: Do we have the right facts? Are we solving problems the way we should? Is this the right standard?

At the same time, we have to remember that learning to work in this new way takes time. We should not be too hard on ourselves, expecting to achieve too much too quickly.

**McKinsey:** *If you were to look at the impact that lean management has had so far for the Migration Board, which results are most gratifying to you?*

**Marcus Toremar:** Part of what is gratifying is just the knowledge that we tried. In Sweden alone there are hundreds of other government authorities, some of which have really tried to change the way they work. But I see some real breakthroughs for us because our senior-management team was willing to commit. That is a source of pride.

It's easy to look to the statistics, see how much faster we are in resolving cases and how many more we can handle, and think that our work is done. But I believe there is so much more ahead of us. We are still very new to this game, and we can do more to make it into a way of life. ○

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