



# AMS IN FOCUS

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## We Don't Make Widgets

As agencies proceed in rolling out the Arizona Management System, don't be surprised if you hear occasional objections like this:

***"That Lean stuff may work in industry, but we're government, not some factory that churns out cars or computers. We're here to make a difference in people's lives, and that's way more important than a corporate bottom line."***

Public service is indeed a noble calling, but let's not fool ourselves that because we work in government, we are somehow special and that lessons gleaned from private sector best practices can't possibly apply to us. Such thinking actually prevents us from delivering vital mission outcomes for the people we serve and kills opportunities to improve.

Author Ken Miller wrote a wonderful book on this very topic titled *We Don't Make Widgets*, which should be required reading for any government worker trapped in dysfunctional systems and looking for a better way to get the work done. A former state employee himself, Miller is widely respected as a leading change agent who has helped many public agencies transform their culture and operations by dispelling a few long-held myths:

- **We don't make widgets. We do!**  
We provide products and services using processes that can easily be measured, managed and improved.
- **We don't have customers. We do!**  
They are the people who actually use what we produce and their satisfaction is critical to our success.

- **We're not here to make a profit. Yes, we are!** But it's defined not in terms of dollars and cents but the return on investment we deliver in real mission outcomes for Arizonans.

Miller recognizes that the key to improving government is to fix its systems for producing and delivering our widgets. Widgets are specific, physical things that can be delivered and counted. They are not activities, which really are processes for how the work gets done. Customers don't care how we do what we do. They care about what we give them to help achieve their desired results.

Some widgets of government are tangible and easy to see, like reports, permits and licenses. But much of what we do in government is hard to see and define, and that is what we must change. The faster and further we can get from squishy, ill-defined activities and move toward measurable substance, the sooner we'll be able to manage our systems at the speed of business, delivering greater citizen outcomes.

Accepting that we actually do make widgets, that we have customers, and that we get to maximize the return on investment for Arizonans by delivering customer value are fundamental to our successful transformation as a continuously improving enterprise through AMS.

