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Standard work – another must for improving your organization

I've previously introduced the following 5S as a logical first step for organizations beginning a continuous improvement journey:

- **Sort:** Remove all of the stuff from the work area that doesn't support the job.

- **Showcase:** Return the work area to a good-as-new condition.

- **Set in Order:** Identify the best location for storing each of the survivors of the Sort phase.

- **Standardize:** Establish clear, visual standards that make it obvious where everything belongs as well as required cleanliness levels.

- **Sustain:** Hold everyone accountable to maintain the clean and orderly workplace.

The first three phases result in a cleaner, more organized workplace. But mastering the last two is even more important because they establish the habits that will determine if any future performance improvement will be maintained.

This month I'd like to introduce Standard Work as another continuous improvement tool. Standard Work is defined as the documented known best process for completing a critical, repetitive task. "Best" means the safest, highest quality or most efficient



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sequence of steps for getting the job done.

In a healthy environment of continuous improvement, employees are constantly challenging themselves to use their creativity and knowledge to

improve Standard Work, thus resulting in an improved process for everyone. Thus Standardize and Sustain are basically the Standard Work for keeping the work area neat and tidy.

Standard Work is:

- The training document for the process, thus providing training consistency. Without it, each trained person adds, omits or changes various lesson points as they subsequently train the next person in the chain.

- The baseline against which future suggested improvements will be measured. This provides an objective means for determining whether an idea is better or not.

When a true improvement is discovered, Standard Work assures that everyone is educated on the better process and understands they are expected to use it.

Like almost all tools, the degree to which Standard Work contributes to the success of an organization depends on how it is used and not if it is used. And like other tools, determining how it is used depends on leadership.

Here are several best practices to maximize Standard Work within your organization:

- Make it clear that Standard Work must be followed. It is the law for the process covered rather than a tip or suggestion. Thus it should be applied judiciously to only those processes where the sequence followed is critical to safety, quality or productivity.

- Standard Work must be clearly identified so there is no question as to its existence. Many organizations utilize a logo to make Standard Work documents obvious.

- Employees performing the task must be represented in the creation of Standard Work. A supervisor or engineer imposing their Standard Work on experienced workers is a recipe for disaster.

- Standard Work documents must be easily accessible to employees while they are performing the covered task. For hands-on workers, this may mean a laminated hard copy while office workers may require a link to

an electronic copy on their computer's desktop.

- A regular audit process to ensure that employees are able and willing to follow Standard Work is important. These audits start with the assumption that people want to follow the process and work to remove barriers that keep them from doing so. Employees who are not willing to follow Standard Work, however, must be held accountable.

Employees in organizations that have established a healthy Standard Work culture typically appreciate the confidence it provides them knowing they are doing the job in the best known manner. It also usually eliminates the frustration of co-workers utilizing a less than optimal method, the root of many "shift wars." Most importantly, customers often recognize the benefit by receiving consistently great products and services.

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