

MID-IOWA BUSINESS

How leaders can take first step on a long journey

Leaders deciding on a continuous improvement initiative for their organizations often opt to begin the journey by applying a tool called 5S, so-named because its components all begin with the letter S:

- **Sort:** Remove all of the “stuff” from the work area that doesn’t support the job.
- **Showcase:** Clean the work area to return it to a good-as-new condition.
- **Set in Order:** Return all of the survivors of the Sort phase to the work area, selecting the absolute best location for each.
- **Standardize:** Establish new cleanliness standards and make it visually obvious where everything belongs so that it gets returned to the right spot ... every time.
- **Sustain:** Hold everyone accountable to maintain the clean and orderly workplace.

Successful 5S leads to improvements in safety, quality and productivity as clutter is replaced with orderliness. Employees spend more time doing productive work and less time getting frustrated looking for the right tool, component, paperwork or computer file.

Just as important, the morale booster that often accompanies the dramatic visual improvement to one’s work area can build confidence and momentum for employees to take on bigger improvement challenges. The demonstrated ability to standardize and sustain improvements will be critical to avoiding the two-steps-forward-one-step-back shuffle during the continuous improvement journey. Coupled with the fact that few



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employees will argue with the goal of a clean and orderly workplace, they make 5S a safe first step towards establishing a culture of contin-

uous improvement.

While 5S is a logical starting point, it certainly is not a slam dunk. In fact, I would guess that less than half of the organizations that attempt to implement 5S successfully do so.

The reason for so many failures? Like so many other strategic initiatives, it boils down to one key factor: lack of leadership.

The most common mistake is the misunderstanding that 5S is only about orderliness and housekeeping; organizations approach a 5S process like you or I would when cleaning out a closet at home:

- Spend hours sorting through the contents to determine what’s worth keeping and what’s headed for the next garage sale.
- Knock down the cobwebs, vacuum and maybe even apply a new coat of paint.
- Meticulously put everything back in a logical, organized fashion.
- Spend a minute pleading with family members to keep it that way.

In other words, these ill-fated attempts focus only on the first three components, almost completely ignoring the behavioral changes which must occur if new habits are to be established and the improvement maintained.

This error spells doom for 5S and puts the continuous improvement at risk. The danger of a flavor-of-the-month initiative is overwhelming.

Here’s how to ensure that your 5S efforts are successful:

- Give equal billing to all five components in terms of time and effort.
- Apply 5S only where it will be used to resolve a legitimate problem, such as accidents, defects or lost production due to disorderliness.


• Before starting, ensure that all impacted managers and supervisors understand their critical role to hold employees accountable to maintain the improvements.

• Go an inch wide and a mile deep with your 5S initiative; in other words, don’t undergo a second 5S project until the first project is being successfully sustained for several weeks.

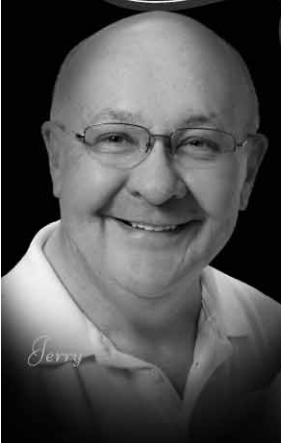

While the concepts are deceptively simple, success requires a well thought out plan and daily discipline, which is not easy. Payback periods, however, can be relatively short with both tangible (financial) and intangible (morale) returns. That’s a winning combination regardless of whether your organization builds transmissions or transmits financial transactions.

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