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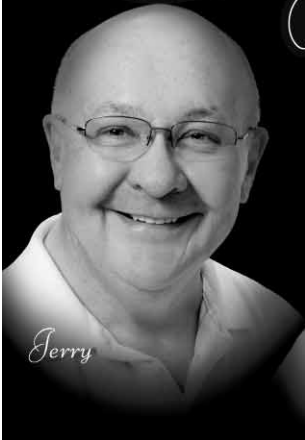
Clear, visual standards

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Last month, we explored 5S as a logical first step for organizations embarking on a continuous improvement journey. I emphasized that it's the last two components, standardize and sustain, that make or break almost all 5S efforts.

"That's all well and fine," a reader responded. "But exactly how do I put effective standards in place? And how in the heck do I hold people accountable?"

Fair questions. Let's start with effective standards.

Establishing meaningful 5S standards involves reaching an agreement with others to maintain the improved work area. Four essential elements must be clearly communicated and understood for effective agreements:

- The goal.
- The actions to be taken to satisfy the goal.
- The schedule for actions.
- The implications for adhering to the timely actions (as well as for failure to do so).

The job of visual standards is to address the first need above, as quickly and clearly as possible. Every work area generally requires two types of visual standards:

- Discrete standards are those that possess only two alternatives (e.g., either the item is properly stored in its designated location or it is not).
- Continuous standards are those involving an infinite number of levels (e.g., floor cleanliness at the end of the workday).

One might argue that evaluating the former is objective while the latter is subjective. But by providing clear and simple documented standards that can be quickly and



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consistently interpreted, employees can easily evaluate compliance. That means those standards must be visual.

Visual discrete standards use shapes, colors, photographs and diagrams as primary communicators rather than words. This speeds the time required to associate an item's reserved parking place with its rightful owner and makes the communication robust against differences in language.

Consider the universal symbols for gender used on restrooms in international airports. Regardless of their native language, travelers from around the world instantaneously comprehend the intended message.

When dealing with continuous standards, it's best to photograph the ideal state and then "create" and photograph a condition the team agrees represents the boundary of acceptance. These are then displayed in the area for future reference as a gauge of both desired and unacceptable conditions.

Creativity is a valuable asset when designing visual standards. Benchmarking public buildings, especially those associated with diverse cultures such as retail centers, hospitals and airports, can provide useful ideas.

The second and third elements of an effective agreement are that the actions required and timeline for those actions are clearly communicated and understood. It's

therefore important the team agrees on and documents the actions required as well as the timing to meet the established standards. These should be incorporated into the job's "standard work instructions" as they become as much a part of the job as the value-adding activities.

Note that all of the elements for a successful agreement require clear understanding. For this reason, all standards established during "standardize" should be tested with "fresh eyes" to ensure their meaning is obvious to someone outside the group.

This is because henceforth they will continuously be interpreted by new employees and visitors. Identify an employee from outside the 5S team that is representative of a new employee. Collect a few items representing a mix of inventory components, tools and supplies, and then ask the volunteer to return them to their respective positions, noting the amount of time to correctly locate each item. Make improvements accordingly.

Mastering the skills required to communicate clear and effective 5S standards will serve a team well in documenting standard work in all areas of their job. Next month, we'll discuss the key points to establishing accountability to sustain improvements.

Rick Brimeyer is the president of Brimeyer LLC, an independent management consulting firm located in Ames that guides organizations to higher performance by focusing on process improvement and leadership development.

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