

The question of five S's

What is 5S? Should it strictly be a work activity, or should it be more like a condition? If it is a work activity, should it be qualified as value-added, necessary or waste? If it is closer to a condition, how can we achieve it without raising costs?

Many organizations practices 5S just as other do quality. They see it as a value-added activity that must be supported by a department, or a function, to be effective. In TPS we think differently. A quality activity is non-value-added. It may be necessary (incidental), but it also generates cost. Therefore such an activity should be minimized by thinking of ways to build quality into the process rather than inspecting and looking for it at the end.

Thus, a quality activity must be placed at the point of cause - where the quality defect actually takes place. Additionally, it must be reliable and easy to manage by the operator to be sustainable. Isn't the purpose of a supporting activity, such as quality, to reduce cost in value earning activities? If it is not doing so, how can it be called a supporting function?

Just like quality checks, 5S becomes an activity that can raise cost when poor material flow, lack of standardized work and excess capacity cripple the plant. Then of course we must "sort", "straighten", "shine", "standardize" and even "sustain" as a separate activity from kaizen. And just like any other disconnected quality activity, it runs the risk of being implemented without its purpose, thus raising cost by performing a non-valued task rather than supporting the goal of reducing cost.

5s is not an activity or a function in itself. It can better be described as a condition that is the result of kaizen aimed at the goal of reducing cost. Only if there is less material, less labor and less capital utilized in making a part can the workplace be better organized and more easily maintained. It's easier to see what information is strictly needed, and what resources are necessary to make the product flow through a value stream of connected processes.

We must ask ourselves why is it that Toyota only uses (four) 4S¹. 4S wasn't good enough so consultants added the 5th S which sands for Sustain. Maybe it is the 5th S that turned 4S into a necessary non-value activity as opposed to a condition. Creating activities around painting walls and marking floors is easier than truly addressing the long-term and complex issue of waste reduction. It is a slick way for consultants to market and sell a short-term tool and activities that can't be sustained without raising cost.

¹ The four S's refer to the corresponding Japanese and English terms of Seiri-Sifting, Seiton-Sorting, Seiso-Sweeping, and Seiketsu-Spick and Span. Collectively they mean the maintaining of an orderly, clean and efficient work environment. Sometime a fifth S in Japanese is added: Shitsuke indicating worksite discipline. *TPS Glossary*, Toyota Motor Corporation