Coaching and Training 5S

The reason 5S is different is that, unlike just about every other Lean technique, it is not based on processes, but instead on the work environment. If you're not careful when training, this can make it seem overly simplistic when in reality a detailed appreciation of each of the 5 S's is essential if they're to be effective in the workplace.

So how do you train 5S?

The answer is that the best way to train 5S is to actually do it!

When I learned 5S it was a 4-day course - sounds excessive right? Four days for a technique that has a reputation for being about how to keep your cupboards tidy!

However, being part of a genuine, textbook application of the tool not only left me a convert for life but with the enthusiasm and willingness to train other people in the same way.

The first point to get across when training 5S is that it is far more than just tidying up.

I know of projects where Lean Six Sigma Belts, keen to apply the clever new techniques they have learned in training, spent a lot of time analysing data about process performance and developing complex improvement ideas based on the analysis and then, when they actually went out to the place where the work was being done, found that no one knew where anything was kept and the biggest use of time was searching for things.

That is how you learn the value of 5S the hard way, the easy way is simply to practice.

Easy might not necessarily be the right word though - while 5S can be less technical than other Lean tools, it can be extremely demanding on a facilitator's influencing skills and might also involve some old-fashioned hard graft - you must be prepared to roll up your sleeves and muck in.

Once you've given everyone involved a quick introduction to the concept and the '8 Wastes', the physical stuff starts with the first 'S'.

Sort

Sort is not just physical though, it's important to remember that for the participants it can be quite emotional too.

On the face of it you're repeatedly asking the same simple questions about every item in the work area you've defined – do we need this to do the work, and if not, do we need it somewhere else or should we get rid of it?

Faced with the stark logic of what you're doing people who have been hoarding items for years just in case they come in useful can sometimes become quite unsettled by the situation.

If they're completely honest with themselves they know they don't need this stuff, and they know there's no point disagreeing with the notion that unnecessary items get in the way and can cause the confusion that leads to defects, but for reasons, they are unable to justify they simply like having it there.

Clutter occurs because people allow it to, when you start to address it you realise that they do this not just because they are untidy people, but because it makes them feel comfortable.

When training people to lead their own 5S activity it is hard to get this across and to explain how to deal with it in a classroom, but in the work environment, it becomes clear.

There are, of course, techniques to deal with this dilemma, such as red-tagging, where any item the usefulness of which cannot be ascertained in the short time available is tagged with the date and reviewed at an agreed date in the future. If it's still not been used then it must go, if it has then we need to find a proper place for it.

Straighten, Sweep and Standardise

Finding a proper place for the items that remain after Sort is the second S, *Straighten*. You then move through *Sweep*, the part which needs the least explanation of all and usually involves brooms, mops, and paint brushes;

Standardise, where you use signs, alarms, visual signals, and anything else which seems appropriate to gain control over how the employees interact with the workplace; and finally Sustain, the part which, if not done properly, risks degradation of the improvements over time to the point where the whole thing might need doing again.

Sustain

Sustain is really just the 5S version of Control, the final stage in DMAIC project management. I've always found it an interesting moment in 5S training when we reach the end of Standardise and I ask the group what they think would happen next if we just finished now and left the people working in the area to carry on. Often the group will have been so involved in creating the improvements they won't have considered this, but when they do they unanimously agree that over time it will just go back to exactly how it was before. This is their challenge for Sustain – what are we going to put in place to ensure that does not happen? If we don't do anything we'll all have wasted our time.

The answer is not the same for every workplace, but it usually involves audits (you can use standard 5S audits or customise them to make them more relevant to your organisation), audit schedules, and visual displays of the current performance. That last one can be particularly effective - no Supervisor wants to prominently display a graph in the area they're responsible for showing that organisation in the workplace is gradually getting worse.

Conclusion

It's only by going through all 5 of the S's in this level of detail that you gain a full understanding of the challenges of implementing the tool, and why it is so essential.

People attending Lean courses are often keen to learn new techniques that will not just benefit the organisation but enhance their personal development, they want to be the person who makes a name for themselves by using these techniques to dramatically reduce the company's costs.

If you have a question about 5S, or if you're looking for support with a specific situation, or maybe you'd like to develop your own Lean skills – feel free to get in touch on 01926 633333 alternatively you can email us at info@bourton.co.uk.