

# What is 5S Really All About?

## If You Think It's Just About Housekeeping, Think Again!

A white paper  
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As with many Toyota Production System (TPS) or “lean” manufacturing tools, companies are increasingly moving to implement 5S within their operations. For many firms, 5S becomes the starting point for a lean conversion and even companies interested in “experimenting” with lean usually choose 5S as a preferred entry point for getting their feet wet.

In spite of the increasing popularity of 5S, we are not convinced that many firms understand the true nature of 5S and, as a result, miss getting the full benefit from the 5S process.

Too often, 5S is understood to be just basic housekeeping and factory organization. In fact, it is much more than that, and is, in fact, a necessary foundation for corporate sustainability and survival.

Taiichi Ohno, co-creator of the Toyota Production System, once said that, “Companies like to try on TPS and then find they are too fat for it.” What Ohno meant was that many (in fact, most) companies are overburdened with waste. Oftentimes this “fat” manifests itself as overproduction, excess inventories, and defects, but in many cases also as inappropriate behaviours and ways of thinking. Every ounce of this fat is pure waste and overweight companies are the least likely to win the marathon race for corporate survival.



So, at a most basic level, the 5S's can be introduced to begin purging the organizational organism of excess waste. But it is at another level that we would like to explore the real meaning of 5S: that of how it relates to people.

### **The Five S's**

The first of the 5S's, Sort, seems fairly obvious. Every working environment accumulates junk. Sort asks us to identify these items and get rid of them. However, Sort is not just about throwing unneeded things away – it can also apply at the highest level where we may purge the organization of unsuccessful product lines, policies and non-value-adding activities.

More importantly, though, Sort is all about asking operators and work teams to take responsibility for their own work area and to identify what is needed and what is not. In effect, with 5S Sort, operators begin taking responsibility for the housekeeping of their work universe: their workstations. The simple act of identifying, and removing, unneeded items becomes an active choice and commitment on the part of operators.

The second S, Simplify, is all about order and organization. Once all the junk has been sorted out, we need to find a place for each thing.

However, what is often overlooked in Simplify is that it is a real test of management commitment to the 5S process. When operators begin to implement 5S Simplify, they usually discover that nothing has been set up to help them in the process: no racks, no shelves, no shadow boards, etc., to keep the work cell in order. At this point, if management does not follow through and help operators to obtain, create and

implement these essential items, then management's credibility will be lost with the people who matter most – the operators.

This does not mean that 5S Simplify activities should be big budget expenditures approved by management. Quite the opposite: companies should start with a small budget and see where they can go using creativity and their own internal resources for making things like tool holders and shadow boards. It should always be remembered that, in the operator's universe, small things count for a lot.

The third S, Shine, is often the most misunderstood. Shine is not fundamentally about having a clean work cell or even a clean factory: it is mostly about maintenance.

Cleaning machines and parts through 5S Shine is the best way to look for cracks, leaks, etc., as well as anticipate future failures. Machine reliability is often subject to the vagaries of Murphy: usually, failure occurs at the worst possible time and when it is least needed or expected. Cleaning, because it entails checking, is therefore the first step in preventive maintenance.

But why should 5S Shine be restricted only to things, such as machines? It can also be broadened to encompass people.

If we worry about equipment failing, why should we also not worry about people failing? People are notoriously bad at the discipline of maintenance. By asking our people to keep the equipment in good working order, we can see who goes about the task

cheerfully and who drags their feet and goes about it sullenly.

It is often said that a disaffected work crew is an accident waiting to happen. The point is that ongoing maintenance is about more than just keeping the machines clean. Rather, it is a management tool. The real issue is professional behaviour at the work place.

The fourth S, Standardize, is about regularly executing the first three S's. Examples in real life abound, often without our knowing it: for example, after cooking a meal, the kitchen must be put back in order.

While Standardize may not often be fun to do, it is the basis of disciplined performance. Think, for a moment, about a world-class chef. How do you think he or she would want their kitchen to look? Standardize is about setting up routines and precise times for order and maintenance. Once at the end of every shift? Before taking a break? Whatever. The important thing is to work on a number of set clean-up tasks, always in the same sequence, so that they become automatic.

5S Standardize is also the basis of standardized work. Introducing standardized cleanup sheets is one way to begin building the basic concept of standardized work. And, because the 5S process is one way of introducing standardized work, we can then begin to lock people into their commitment to take responsibility for their workstation.

It's worth noting that responsibility is not a command, it's a feeling. You can't order anyone to take responsibility. Rather, you must talk them into accepting ownership of responsibility. At the same time, however, you do not want to create mini-

fiefdoms of individual work cells – you want to retain overall control and that is what makes 5S such a powerful tool.

Which brings us to the fifth, and last, S – Sustain. Sustain is all about discipline. Making sure that everyone keeps up the daily 5S discipline is purely a management problem. It may be the responsibility of the team leader, but it is also driven and supported by the auditing system that is used to measure conformance to the 5S process. Whatever the management supervisory mechanism, the point is always to ensure that 5S is maintained day in, day out, rain or shine.

However, discipline is not only about making sure that 5S gets done. It is also about people learning. The word “discipline” has its root in the Latin word *disciplina*, which means teaching or learning. The discipline of 5S cultivates learning. Through implementing the 5S process continuously, we can surface problems in the work environment. These problems, in turn, require us to come up with solutions, which we implement, and so we learn in the process. 5S is, fundamentally, about people learning how to do the work better.

So, the next time you hear someone say that 5S is all about housekeeping, think about people. After all, it's your people and not a tidy workstation that make your product, isn't it?

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