

## Applying the 5S Philosophy in Your Workplace

### What is "5S"?

5S stands for five simple Japanese words: **Seiri** (Structurize), **Seiton** (Systemize), **Seiso** (Sanitize), **Seiketsu** (Standardize), and **Shitsuke** (Sustain). The five words sound simple and explicit by meaning; however, its maintenance is the key for success. Like other Japanese management philosophies such as TQM (Total Quality Management), Kaizen (continuous improvement), JIT (Just-In-Time) and Lean Production, 5S helps a company improve its productivity, work efficiency and quality. Before discussing how to implement this philosophy at your workplace, let's learn about the essence and the critical milestone for each "S".

**Seiri** encourages abolishing the unnecessary items or things which are not required to complete the job. You may have seen people spending hours looking for an important document. It is because there are too many things around which may or may not be I-M-P-O-R-T-A-N-T. In this advanced technology era, we are overloaded by all sort of information, papers and documents. If we are still gripping onto the attitude of "saving for a rainy day," we may need a hundred-square-meters workplace to hold all the stuff we need. **Seiri** reduces time in searching for the wanted items; hence, work can become more efficient and effective. More time can then be put into managing the quality; and in return, performance can be enhanced.

**Seiton**. Systemization facilitates efficient and effective retrieval. A library catalog or a systemic filing system serves this purpose. When everyone knows where to find the tools / information required, it reduces time to look for a particular item and enhances work efficiency. **Seiton** is reinforced by **Seiketsu** (which is discussed below), where management sets forth the preferred standards and work procedures, which helps manage the performance and promote the desired behaviors from staff. Nevertheless, **Seiton** promotes a structure or framework for all staff to follow.

**Seiso**. This "S" encourages daily cleaning and follow-up. It is also important to sustain this improvement. It appears to be more applicable in the manufacturing setting, however, it also proves its criticality in non-manufacturing where daily clean up on e-mails and work are deemed necessary. A "to-do" list will help set priority, measuring achievements, and be a reminder for uncompleted tasks. The habit of cleaning-up aids in reminding what have and have not been finished. Furthermore, it can freshen up one's mind of what needs to be accomplished on the next day.

**Seiketsu**. Once the first three S's are implemented, the focus should shift on standardizing the best practice at the workplace. This is to set out the internal control policy on maintaining the preferred working procedures and behaviors in order to sustain efficiency, effectiveness, consistency and quality. This requires participation of staff at all levels to contribute opinions on what should the "best practice" be in order to strive for the organization's mission and vision. Think of some of the worldwide successful companies such as: GE, Motorola, UPS, and McDonald's. Their work standards are the reason for their current success.

**Shitsuke**. This is the most vital element and it is also the most difficult aspect to be implemented. It is human nature to resist change and people have the tendency of staying in the comfort zone. Nevertheless, in order to sustain the 5S philosophy, management needs to educate individual employees on the importance and benefits of such philosophy – to their own work and personal development. As a result, every employee will be willing to take up the responsibility and turn it into a personal habitual behavior.

### Enhancing Performance Management Through 5S

5S is a personal disciplinary development that promotes attitudinal changes and habits. It can apply in personal life, home life and social life. Supporters of 5S believe that when one is self-disciplined, it will improve the way he / she tackles personal matters or job tasks. At work, 5S assists companies in managing work performance of employees because it establishes the preferred standards and policy requested.

5S is a backbone of other management philosophies. It grows from individual level and then expands to organizational level. When the individual performs well, it will also create an influential impact to his / her peers. Alongside with encouragement and recognition, management can easily promote expected behaviors from staff. On the other hand, employees have a better idea of what they need to achieve to demonstrate their competencies.

In brief, the 5S theory supports and maintains the performance management system. 5S enhances work efficiency, where such improvement can eventually be translated into quantitative data to measure the magnitude of changes. A successful launching of 5S relies heavily on self-discipline and continual maintenance of individuals. It also requires active promotion, reminder and strict discipline at all times.

## Implementing 5S in Your Workplace

How to make 5S work in your workplace? It is not too difficult; however, continual practice is most important. Here are a few steps to bring 5S to your office:

**Setting the momentum.** Understand the philosophy thoroughly and look at the deficiency of the current situation. Resistance to change may hinder the adaptation of 5S, however, it is important to build the courage and mindset that change is for the “better” rather than the “worse”.

**Making it a habit.** As mentioned earlier, 5S should become part of an individual’s life to make it successful. Thus, it is an attitudinal change to every individual who practices this philosophy. When an individual begins to practice 5S, it will then gradually become a routine that he / she will use in daily life.

**Practice makes perfect.** As the Chinese proverb say, “Sharpen the tools in order to do work effectively.” If we can standardize the “best practice,” it can greatly facilitate in improving work efficiency and building up competitive advantage in advancing our competitors in this fast-moving business environment.

**The Kaizen Way.** 5S has close interrelationship with Kaizen – another Japanese management philosophy, which advocates continuous improvement. Setting up the best practices does not mean being the “best” in the market already. It requires never-ending effort to improve in all aspects since the world is changing in an exponential rate.

Overall, periodic evaluation is an efficient measurement tool in assessing the effectiveness of such philosophy. Due to the advance of technology and the fast-moving business environment, management practice needs to be flexible and adaptable to change whenever required. Although the management concept may remain status quo, the substance and methodology may require modification. In this case, management needs to bear in mind that no single management philosophy is applicable in all settings, but each type of management philosophy can be applied to every kind of setting with appropriate adjustments.

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