

Cleanliness Is Next to Profitability

By Rebecca A. Morgan
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Organization and cleanliness can provide a strong foundation for quality, communication, and effective management for any business.

In many homes, the refrigerator is covered with schoolwork, pictures, and a schedule of social obligations. Unfortunately, when an important phone call comes in and a message dutifully is taken and posted on the refrigerator, it is unlikely to be noticed amidst the clutter. The inability to tell normal (schoolwork and schedules) from abnormal (urgent message) at a glance can cause an unfortunate delay in responding to the message.

The same “clutter” found on a home’s refrigerator mirrors the same breakdown of communication many businesses suffer due to disorganization. Maintaining an organized and clean work environment can provide a strong foundation for quality, communication, and effective management for any business.

Two concepts are especially helpful in that regard: (a) It should be easy for anyone to find “it” and easy for anyone to put “it” away, and (b) one should be able to tell abnormal from normal at a glance. Using the refrigerator example, an improvement could be a door section labeled “notes for Mom and Dad” -- nothing else goes there. The system makes it easy for visitors to know where to put a note (“it”) for you and you know where to find immediately any notes (“it”) when you walk in -- to tell abnormal from normal at a glance.

As you begin to create a culture of organization and cleanliness at your company, the well-established “5S” process can be quite useful. It is called 5S because of the 5 words that begin with S:

- Sort
- Set in Order
- Shine
- Standardize
- Sustain

1. **Sort** – (A) Get rid of unneeded things, and (B) move what is not needed now so it is out of the way, yet reasonably accessible when you do need it.

2. **Set in Order** – A place for everything and everything in its place. Figure out the best place to keep each item; for example, items you need frequently should be closer and more convenient than things you need less often. A good labeling system can significantly reduce time wasted looking for things and make it easier for anyone to return items correctly. You may be comforted when surrounded by piles, but the time of others is wasted as they must find and interrupt you each time they need something. Places like Home Depot have strangers off the street looking for, handling, and putting back their inventory. Learn what works and what doesn’t work from places you visit and utilize those ideas to make your own business more effective.

3. **Shine** – Clean and inspect. Cleanliness enhances customer confidence and makes it easier for employees to take pride in their work. A schedule that explains the who, what, when and how of cleaning may seem like overkill, but in fact is quite helpful.

When the cleaning process is well implemented, it makes sense to begin to inspect items being cleaned. For example, a hotel maid can easily check all light fixtures, radio alarm clocks, and televisions while cleaning a room, reporting problems to maintenance. The hotel guest shouldn’t be the one performing the quality check.

4. **Standardize** – A standard method for the first three S’s and prevention of the need for the first three. How? I’ve seen a high volume

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kitchen cabinet manufacturing operation that is practically sawdust free because they were committed to eliminating the dust and dirt, not just cleaning it. One print shop changed the handling of advance runs (put away, get out), reducing workload by 20%. Quick oil change shops conveniently hang the filler hose from the ceiling so the worker can reach up to grab it; when finished, he simply lets go and it automatically goes back in place. Prevent the need to sort, to set in order, or to shine by thinking differently about what you do.

5. **Sustain** – Make it a part of the ingrained culture. It means neat, clean, and organized is part of who we are, and how we behave. Set the expectation, support the behavior, and put in place simple systems so that everyone can tell normal from abnormal at a glance.

Does 5S turn something simple into something unnecessarily complex? Not at all. It provides a methodology for thinking about your business, in what is perhaps a new way, that can improve quality, communication, and simplify management at close to no cost.



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