Quality Qorner

Getting—and Staying—Organized

DOI: 10.1309/427UXXDX3G62B4LO

A few months ago, you heard my story about house building; however, I also learned a lesson about moving. Moving companies provide lots of advice about packing but there are no pamphlets for unpacking and creating order out of chaos after the movers have deposited all the boxes and furniture. Although the furniture was where it needed to be, the boxes were not necessarily in their proper new location. I looked around and felt totally overwhelmed. At this point the boxes were winning—chaos ruled.

In my travels and visits to laboratories all over the world, I often get the same feeling of being overwhelmed. Not by the size and scope of the menu of laboratory tests, and not by the size and number of automated analyzers and robotic sample handing devices, but by the overwhelming chaos everywhere. Papers are taped to cabinets, ink long faded and edges curled, that no one can even read anymore. Every computer screen is edged with numerous colored sticky notes, each bearing a vital message. Boxes with myriad contents are stacked in every available nook and cranny. Papers and computer printouts lay on every square inch of available space. Ring binders are stacked in shelves or on countertops every which way. It always makes me think that the laboratory has just moved in and hasn't finished unpacking yet, and I wonder if the staff members' houses look like this. In one office, I had to walk the maze between waist-high stacks of articles and journals to reach the occupant's desk.

At least my situation would be temporary if I just spent the next few days getting organized. As I was filling the bookshelves in my office I came across the solution to taming the chaos, both in my own personal home and in the laboratories I visit—or *your* own laboratory. The solution is a quality management practice called "5S."

Translated from the source Japanese, the 5Ss are the first letters of a set of words it is wise to remember. The 5S philosophy is a systematic way to create order out of chaos, primarily in the work environment—although it works just as well in anyone's personal space.

S#1: Sort. The goal is to remove all items from the work space that are not needed for the tasks performed there. It's not about simply rearranging what's already there. It's about questioning the need for each item and the minimum quantity necessary to accomplish the work tasks. Unneeded items are eliminated from the workspace and are relocated, thrown away, or sold.

Items that can typically be sorted out and removed include:

- Unneeded files, paperwork, books, journals, and reference materials
- Outdated posters, signs, notices, and memos
- Defective, excess, or unneeded items that accumulate (think office supplies)
- Outdated or broken tools, supplies, or equipment
- Old or unused cleaning supplies

S#2: Set in order (Simplify). The goal is to arrange needed items in the work space in alignment with the workflow and to make them easy to locate, use, and put away. The economy of motion principle is applied so that everything needed is within arm's reach and stored in the sequence used so that body motion is kept to a minimum. In this principle, every essential item has a home, which can be delineated with marked borders to show proper locations. Labeled items are to be kept in their respective labeled homes; when something it out of place, it can be easily relocated to its proper home.

S#3: Shine. The goal is to keep the workplace clean and safe. Whereas the organization's housekeeping and maintenance staffs are tasked with dusting, waste removal, and floor cleaning, those personnel are usually not allowed to disturb or move anything on laboratory countertops or desktops. Therefore, responsibilities for laboratory staff to straighten and organize the workspace need to be assigned—and assigned staff should be held accountable for those tasks.

S#4: Standardize. The goal is to have everyone doing the right things, the right way, every time. This includes not only documented work processes and procedures for laboratory's testing and technical activities, but also documented schedules and instructions for Sort, Set in order, and Shine. The best way to ensure that the first 3 "Ss" are regularly practiced is to get the laboratory staff to agree on the visual clues that help people keep everything where it should be; the item and quantity requirements; the instructions for sorting; simplifying, and shining; the schedule for these activities; and the assignment of responsibilities.

S#5: Sustain. The goal is to implement the 5S program with a discipline that ensures its continued success. The best way to sustain the program is to integrate 5S practices into the laboratory's work processes so that they are performed as a matter of the laboratory's routine operations. 5S audits should be included in the laboratory's internal audit program. Remember that the laboratory no longer has the opportunity to "get ready" for an inspection—it must be constantly ready—so clean-up should be constant as well.

I really did take the 5S practice to heart in my new house, short of putting green tape around where the measuring spoons go in the baking items drawer. It turns out that as we're all getting older, the 5S philosophy also makes it easier to remember where things are—and that will certainly help in a busy stressful place such as the medical laboratory.

This Month's Quality Quote:

"One cannot have morale without cleanliness."

—Ford and Crowther

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