Standardizing Personal Processes

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Look at any continuous improvement philosophy, and at its heart you will find standardization. When people don't perform a process the same way each and every time, quality suffers, lead times are erratic (and long), and productivity is hamstrung. No operation can prosper without stable processes that can deliver consistent results.

Because of this, leaders focus most of their company's improvement resources on the obvious opportunities. Highly repetitive processes can show dramatic improvement when they are standardized. Shop floor production, logging expense reports, and document retention are prime candidates for Lean Six Sigma projects, simply because the processes are done so frequently.

But what leaders and professionals (i.e. engineers, accountants, consultants, and marketers) often overlook are the processes that they do as a recurring part of their own jobs. Scheduling meetings, creating daily plans, updating key performance metrics, responding to emails, returning phone calls, and the multitude of other tasks filling modern calendars are generally done without the slightest bit of standardization.

Fortunately, there is a growing trend to address this issue. A new buzzword-Leader Standard Work—has even started making the rounds in Lean blogs. That this new focus has emerged is not surprising. The fact that it has taken this long to gain that sort of emphasis, though, is amazing.

Consider these tips when developing standard work for the processes you do in your job.

1) Start with 5S.

No process can thrive in chaos. Organize your workspace so each and every process starts from a consistent point. You should never have to look for a file, sift around your desk for a note on a scrap of

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paper, or have to call someone back because you could not find a relevant document on your computer. Plus, an organized workplace sets a good example for your employees.

2) Find planning tools that work for you.

Some people use voice recorders, others use 3x5 cards. Some print Outlook calendars. Still others use the calendar on their phone. Regardless of what you select, use it. No tool will work well if it is not used.

3) Identify your processes.

Look at the things you do. Most jobs, even creative ones, have a large degree of repetition. Take, for example, my writing process. I use a database to manage the workflow of each article I write. My processes cover idea generation, audience assessment, creating images, drafting, editing, and posting articles online. Having standardized processes keeps my quality up and my effort down. It doesn't put words on the computer screen, but the standardization lets me use more of my time on the important parts of my job and less on the minutia that can cause me problems.

Leadership is similar. On the surface it seems like a vague, ethereal concept, but most tasks that leaders do are repetitive. Doing a walkthrough of an area, conducting morning meetings, and documenting observations about employee performance to give effective feedback are all tasks that leaders can standardize.

4) Write them down.

It is not enough to simply have a process. You must document it and work to improve it. This is especially important for the tasks that you do monthly, quarterly, or annually. They are the ones where you likely spend the most time reinventing the wheel; there's always one step that you just can't seem to get right the first time.

5) Hold yourself accountable.

Most people are challenged by this tip. It is rare to see people create performance metrics about how many notes they made on employee performance (leaders), how many new contacts a person initiated (salesperson), or how many hours of advanced training one attended (engineer).

Consider how you will do a self-assessment of your performance. One effective way to hold your own feet to the fire is to develop a metric for yourself and post it on the wall of your workspace. That way you will have to look at it every day and make an active decision not to do what you have decided is a necessary part of your job.

6) Improve your processes.

Complacency is the fastest path to failure. Just because you are doing something well today doesn't mean it will be good in the future. Rolodexes used to be a key part of any contact management process. It is rare to see an executive nowadays without their entire contact list on their cell phone.

Becoming an effective leader or professional does not happen by accident. Raw talent only takes you so far. You will have to work hard to be successful in an increasingly competitive world. But with good processes, you have to work a little less hard.

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This article was written by Jeff Hajek, author of the Lean survival guide, Whaddaya Mean I Gotta Be Lean? You can learn more about him and his groundbreaking book at ***www.Velaction.com*** [1].

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