

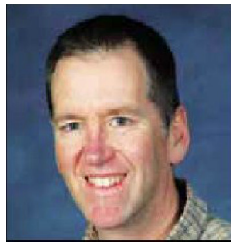
**RICK BRIMEYER**

# Sustaining the gains

A little over a year ago, I accepted an opportunity to facilitate a 5S event on the Engineering Garage at my former employer of 25 years, Danfoss Power Solutions.

While I relish chances to return to Danfoss and enjoy the immediate feedback that accompanies a 5S event, I was nervous about this one.

First, a quick review of 5S. 5S is a tool for creating and maintaining an organized, clean workplace where prob-



**Rick Brimeyer**

lems (e.g., missing supplies, inventory shortages) become immediately and visually obvious. The 5S is so named because its five distinct phases all

begin with the letter S:

- Sort: Remove all of the “stuff” from the work area that doesn’t support the job
- Showcase: Clean the work area to return it to a good-as-new condition
- Set in Order: Return all of the survivors of the Sort phase to the work area, selecting the absolute best location for each
- Standardize: Establish new cleanliness standards and make it visually obvious where everything belongs so that it gets returned to the right spot ... every time
- Sustain: Hold everyone accountable to maintain the new standards

The first three steps are basically followed each time we clean a garage or closet at home.

But those efforts are typically in vain as invariably the area is allowed to slowly slip back to its former disorganized and dirty state.

The last two steps therefore make 5S unique. Establishing clear, visual standards to define the new state and ensuring the discipline of everyone who comes in contact with the area to follow the standards.

It was the last two steps that worried me with the Engineering Garage.

I had no doubt that we could make a dramatic improvement during the event. But could we sustain it?

While Standardize and Sustain are always a challenge, my history with Danfoss told me that the Engineering Garage would be especially trying:

- Five different teams routinely shared the work space; the opportunity for finger pointing whenever a mess was left would be tremendous
- “Outsiders” including customers and employees from other departments occasionally performed work in the garage; these individuals would have little ownership for maintaining improvements
- Working on hydraulic systems for off-highway vehicles is inherently messy

A year later, I’m happy to report that my fears were unfounded. The Engineering Garage routinely looks as good as or better today than it did at the Report Out immediately following our event.

The success isn’t due to any special secrets which I unveiled during the event.

Rather, it’s a direct result of the dedicated efforts of the five managers and their employees.

Their actions provide some valuable lessons for sustaining any improvement.

First of all, all five managers cleared their busy calendars and were full participants during the entire four-day event.

They each volunteered key team members to also be full participants. They thus supported the effort with the most critical resource ... time.

The managers routinely augmented my teaching with powerful, personal comments as to how important creating a cleaner, more organized garage was to their team and to the organization as a whole.

They made funds available when purchases were needed to store tools and supplies in a more orderly manner.

Both their actions and their words spoke volumes regarding the importance they associated with the project.

The true extent of their commitment, however, became obvious after the event.

Each of the five managers agreed to sign up for a week to perform a detailed, daily audit of the garage at the end of the workday.

Using digital photos,

they distributed a daily report reinforcing desired behaviors and noting opportunities for further improvement.

By the end of the five weeks, new habits were being established and various employees, hungry to maintain the improved work area, volunteered to take over auditing.

Today, with very rare exceptions, the area is in a perpetual “tour ready” state even as the regular work of overhauling hydraulic systems occurs.

The very nature of progress begins with leaders having the vision to elevate normal.

Improvements are realized by leaders trusting their employees to find a better way and by making resources available.

Finally, gains are sustained through leaders’ courage and commitment.

*Rick Brimeyer is the President of Brimeyer LLC, an independent management consulting firm located in Ames which guides organizations to higher performance by focusing on process improvement and leadership development. Further information is available at [www.brimeyerllc.com](http://www.brimeyerllc.com) or by calling (515) 450-8855.*

**Let’s get down to business**

Mailed directly to chamber members and inserted into the Tribune every month.

