SYSTEMS

Is that banana inactive or active?

David Winders raises what may seem a bit of a strange question for a leasing magazine, but this question was asked and received widespread coverage in the press earlier this year

Consultants were appointed to a government department to introduce "lean" practices. These involved eliminating waste and improving the flow of activity through the operation (lean operations were covered in detail in the June 2007 issue of *Leasing World).* One of the techniques deployed was something called 5S: Sort, Set in Order, Shine, Standardise and Sustain.

5S is about getting the workplace into a suitable state to maximise throughput and reduce waste. With its origins in manufacturing it promotes a well organised work environment, ensuring the equipment and items that staff regularly use are placed efficiently. In a factory it is perhaps more obvious why having racks for tools with predefined places, and tools and parts trays for each worker helps efficiency and cycle time - a clean floor shows up an oil leak much more easily than a messy one.

"You might create the complete opposite of your original intention"

However, in the office these principles can also be applied. If each desk in a new business team has a standard set of trays for different types of work, standard control checklists, user guides, and predetermined formats for documents and proposal forms, it establishes "best practice" for a consistent approach. When we do things consistently - even consistently badly - it makes measurement and subsequent managed im-

provement much easier. A new business office of twenty people, all doing different things in different ways, makes process management and structured improvement a complete nightmare.

How does the issue of the 'activity' of a banana come into all of this? The office in question had taken the principles of 5S a little too far, albeit with good intentions. Its idea was to have each workstation identical with appropriate equipment positioned in the best place to handle the incoming work. This involved taping areas of the desk to show positions for a stapler, a calculator and relevant forms. It also involved the removal of personal items and perceived clutter. Any items not involved with the work in hand were deemed "inactive". So when a banana was left lying on a workers desk it prompted the infamous question from a manager , "is that banana inactive or active?" The resulting publicity from this case - suggesting waste of public money by the use of consultants - did considerable damage to a concept that, if applied appropriately, has a lot of sense.

What happened in this case was the inappropriate delivery of a methodology that did not have a cultural fit within the organisation concerned. This resulted in the exercise imploding on itself, warmed up by public sector unions, and fuelled by media interest. The message from this incident is: if you employ external help or bring in any new approach you should always apply to what is appropriate for you, rather than blindly following the manual. Otherwise you might create the complete opposite of your original intention. Good consultants use appropriate tools rather than forcing you to follow a predetermined method.

The common sense in doing things in a standardised way, in this case with

waste reduced by having everything close to hand, is obvious. If the office is tidy you can spot that elusive proposal form more easily. But if the office desks are covered in paper, with work stacked in boxes under the desks and printers strewn with uncollected output then you can't. A leading financial services company on the south coast applied 5S and filled two confidential waste skips with unused paperwork and material that was cluttering up their underwriting department. Another leading lessor had 5S by accident when its building burned down! The resulting reduction in paper is remembered as a watershed in the company's development!

If you have a new person starting, sit them at a workstation that has been set up like everyone else's with all things that the individual needs to do the job as you would like it done. This will make getting up to speed and delivering value from that individual considerably easier.

Ultimately, this is all about sensible organisation and is not just a clear desk policy to keep the data protection and compliance people happy. It is not about counting the number of cuddly toys on the top of the monitor, suppressing individuality, or deciding whether a fruit snack is inactive or inactive. Give 5S a go and see an improvement in productivity, throughput of work, and professionalism. But please keep it appropriate to your business and culture. Oh … and remember, banana skins are a health and safety issue so put them in the bin!

David Winders.