

The Mother of (5S) Invention

Lean living

by Mike Micklewright



Question: Why was the son of an accountant for a U.S. manufacturing company forbidden to name his dog Fifo?

Answer: His Dad told him that all four-letter words starting with *F* are bad.

Last Tuesday, I performed another long, exhausting, internal audit with a client near my hometown in Chicago suburbia. I had written 10 solid nonconformities and presented the findings to my client just weeks after the registrar auditor had given the same client a clean bill of health and no incentive to improve. I guess it was called an internal audit because we stayed inside all day.

By the time I got home, I was spent and the last thing I wanted to do was think. When I entered our home, my wife Donna, called up from the basement from where we share an office, "Hi Hon! I'm in the basement. How was your day?"

I responded creatively, "Good! How was yours?"

Donna said, "Great, I got so much done today."

At that moment, I knew I was in trouble and that her accomplishments would generate additional tasks for me. I should've just pretended not to hear her and run upstairs to take a nap. When Donna says that she got "so much done," it usually means that she has organized something, which usually means she wants me to organize something of mine, because my stuff is interfering with her organization.

So I politely yelled back, "That's great!"

My worst fears came true. "Could you come down here for a minute?" she asked.

Upon reaching the bottom step of our carpeted offices, I saw organized piles of books, manuals, papers, and boxes strewn across the entire office area. Donna was culling through all of her old teaching materials, separating the current stuff from the stuff she doesn't need or use anymore. She had also taken the liberty of going through some of my training and consulting material, along with my old electronic equipment, software, and disks, and placed them all into neatly stacked piles in the corner of my office. It looked like she had attempted to sort my bad stuff from my good stuff, as if she would know.

"Look at what I've done! I feel so good. I've organized all my stuff, and I've thrown out five large garbage bags full of stuff. I have so much extra room now," she said. "And I hope you don't mind, but I've also gone through some of your stuff and put anything questionable over there in the corner. Do you think you can go through it when you get the chance and get rid of anything you no longer need?"

In my male, defensive voice, I questioned, "Now? You didn't throw anything of mine away, did you?"

Donna chuckled, "Of course not!"

As I walked over to my piles, I quipped sarcastically under my breath, "I'm surprised you didn't put red tags on all my stuff." You know, the red tagging that's part of the first S in 5S—sort, set in order, shine, standardize and sustain. If Donna knew about red tagging, she'd red tag nonstop everyday, and I'd have to practice 5S at home, in addition to preaching and teaching it as a consultant and trainer. Thank God she didn't hear me.

Donna had placed into piles all of my "questionable" stuff. She wanted me to cull through, and perhaps toss out, some of the following:

- Training materials for ISO 9001, 9002, and 9003 (1987 and 1994 editions)
- Other standards, such as Military Standard 105D and 105E and ISO 10011
- QS-9000 standard
- Conference proceedings from the 1980s and 1990s
- Transparencies for the overhead projector
- Floppy disks containing training materials (3.5 in. and 5.25 in.)
- Old software and manuals
- Historical information from when I worked for the Saturn Project (before it became a corporation and started to produce vehicles)
- Clunky old cell phones
- Quality circle and TQM materials

"What is it with women and their constant need to organize and keep things orderly?," I wondered, very quietly, to myself. It's not like we live in caves anymore and they have this inherent need to gather berries and nuts (while I hunt for more materials) and then organize them in an orderly first-in-first-out (FIFO) fashion, so that we eat the food in the exact order that she picked it, thus ensuring that no food spoils and there's no waste. We have modern conveniences, like refrigerators, and we have a house with lots of space. Let's fill that space up with stuff, I say.

Besides, who knows when I might get into a conversation with a client about ISO 9001:1987 and want to compare it to today's version? And what if my laptop breaks down, and I need my transparencies?

It's all so obvious to me now. I know what's happening. My wife has been getting together with other wives. My mother has been getting together with your mothers. And they talk about us beer-guzzling, dirty, good-for-nothing slobs.

I know when they do this, too. I noticed that every time my wife attends one of those candle or Tupperware parties, she never comes home with any products. I thought she was a gatherer! Well, she is. She and all the other mothers and wives have been gathering and developing techniques to improve their sons and husbands. They have been plotting against us and inventing techniques like 5S.

I'm sure it all started with innocent, gossipy talk, "My Michael, he leaves his dirty underwear and socks all over the bedroom." To which her friend Laura would've said, "Oh, I know what you're talking about. My Jason is so unorganized, he can't find any of his tools. I swear he'd lose his head if it weren't attached." And then they all laughed.

What started out so innocently evolved into five S. I'm sure that giving it a Japanese origin made up of 5 Japanese words was my wife's contribution. She knows how anyone in the corporate world—especially a consultant who knows that any potential client can be sold on a new tool, especially if it sounds Japanese—responds to Japanese catchphrases.

My wife's a smart food gatherer. That's why I call her the Mother of (5S) Invention. She's not too smart for this whys guy, though. I know what she's doing, and I'll make sure that I *kamikaze* any of her efforts to toss out my old stuff under the guise of a lean tool.

After all, 5S is for showcasing, for giving trainers more business; it's for showing our customers and stakeholders how pretty our facility is and that we are becoming lean. It's not for real life, right? We can get rid of waste and stuff at work, but can't we still be wasteful at home? Can't we? What do you think?

About the author

Mike Micklewright is president of [QualityQuest Inc.](http://QualityQuest.com), a Chicago-based consulting, training and facilitation company specializing in lean, ISO 9001, ISO/TS 16949, Six Sigma, and their integration. Micklewright is an ASQ-certified Six Sigma Black Belt, quality auditor, quality engineer, and quality manager. He holds a degree in general engineering from the University of Illinois and has worked in design, manufacturing, and quality engineering for the Saturn Corp. of General Motors and SeaquistPerfect Dispensing. Micklewright is a sought-after speaker and has had many articles published. He also performs stand-up comedy in which he makes fun of the world of continual improvement and has developed, produced, acted in, and sells video training programs.