

The Origins and Evolution of 5S

Did you know that 5S (sometimes now even expanded to 6S) started with just 2Ss in Japan? I was curious about the history of 5S and asked Isao Yoshino to provide his perspective. What follows below is a lightly edited (for language and flow) description from him.

For context, 5S is a workplace organization system based on concepts all represented by words starting with the "S" sound in Japanese, and paired with English words also starting with "S." The direct translation of the Japanese word is in parentheses.

Seiri	→ Sort (organize)	→ Separate the needed from the not needed
Seiton	→ Set in order (orderliness)	→ Organize for easy identification
Seiso	→ Shine (cleanliness)	→ Clean the work area
Seiketsu	→ Standardize (standardize)	→ Schedule regular cleaning and maintenance daily
Shitsuke	→ Sustain (discipline)	→ Make the other steps a habit and way of life

— Katie Anderson

Isao Yoshino's Comments

Katie, you asked me about the origins of 5S in Toyota or in Japan. I am not so sure about how it exactly started in Toyota and in Japan, or the definite timing when 2S changed to 5S (by adding other 3S: Seiso, Seiketsu and Shitsuke). The following is just my assumptions, based on my own observation and experience. I really appreciate your questions because I can start learning something new at my age. Once again, I recall an old saying: "It's never too late to learn something new."

— Isao Yoshino

I. Foundation of the Principles in Japanese Culture

Seiso (cleanliness)

As you know from your Japan Study Trips, school children clean the classroom floor and the hallway during classes. They also wipe the floor with small rugs. They do that every day. It is based on the concept that their classroom is an important place for them to learn and they need to clean up (Seiso) their workplace before they start learning. It's a key procedure to start doing something important.

At Toyota, during the NUMMI training program, American shop floor leaders saw their Japanese counterpart leaders clean up the floor and worksite each day. They were so impressed with the concept and they started cleaning their workplace once they returned to Fremont, CA by their own initiatives. In the US offices, I believe people hire janitors to clean the workplace. People working at the desk don't clean

their desks. When they come up to the office next morning, their messy desktop become clean and they take it for granted. What a difference!

Other examples:

Japanese houses are designed to have more flexibility in each room. In older days, wedding ceremonies were held at the largest room in the Japanese style house. That largest room is designed for a big event such as family members gatherings, wedding ceremonies, neighbors' gatherings. Also we have shoji (wooden lattice sliding doors with paper on the lattice) or fusuma (made of wood, fabric and paper) to divide each room. When we have a big event, we take away those shoji or fusuma and make it a big room. When the ceremony is finished, shoji and fusuma are places on the shikii (rail) to make small rooms again. Those rooms are basically small and so we need to do Seiri-Seiton at all times so that each room does not get messy.

When a Japanese carpenter finishes his day's work, he sharpens the blade of his plane which he had been using the entire day.

All these examples show that Japanese people are very serious about Seiri & Seiton concepts from ancient times. It has become our basic routine.

Seiketsu (standardize – regular cleaning maintenance)

I believe you have experienced Japanese-style onsen baths and provide this experience on your Japan Study Trips. I hope you liked taking a bath in the hot spring.

One of the biggest effects of onsen bathing is that you can recover from fatigue. It is also good to ward off disease and promote health and, of course, to keep you clean (Seiketsu).

Another benefit would be that you can forget the worries and unpleasant things you went through in the daytime and turn over a new leaf for the next day by soaking yourself in the hot water. Sometimes you would enjoy onsen bathing several times a day. You can physically remove dirt from your body by taking a shower. But onsen has more benefit. It helps you to clean up your body and also refresh your soul as well. It's mental stability.

Shitsuke (discipline and habitual routine)

The word of Shitsuke originally comes from the Japanese kimono sewing technique. "Shitsuke" of 5S comes from the expression of "Shitsuke Ito" (Basting Thread). This Shitsuke-Ito is used when kimono making – when the tailor starts sewing Japanese clothes. In order to make the stitching seam very straight, the tailor sews in a Shitsuke-Ito (Basting Thread) first. When all the basting threads are sewn in, the tailor checks whether the seam is straight as originally planned. If the seam is straight, then the tailor will sew in the primary thread and then remove the

Basting Thread. So, Shitsuke, in the case of sewing technique, means a temporary method.

When a small child grows, he/she has to learn how to live together with other people nicely or how to behave good with other people. As small kids have no idea on that topic, parents should first show them how to behave and how to cope with other people. This practice by parents can be called "Shitsuke" or "Sewing in Shitsuke-Ito." When kids have learned from their parents how to behave right after many practices, then kids are expected to learn behave or morals and deal with other people by their own without any advice (= Shitsuke-Ito) from somebody else.

From this context, Shitsuke (5th S) should mean that everybody should learn something by actually doing things by themselves and learn what is right and what is not by themselves. It is not something that big bosses or older people or parents force them to do. It is something that small children voluntarily learn by themselves.

II. History of 5S at Toyota

Seiri & Seiton

It is true that 2S (Seiri & Seiton) was so popular at Toyota when I joined Toyota in 1966.

I believe that Seiri (sort out the necessary things) and Seiton (put them in a right order) was the very first and basic thing which people started practicing at their workplace at Toyota. We often say the phrase of "Seiri-Seiton" as if it were just one word. Because we "do Seiri (sort out)" first and then we "do Seiton (put them in right order)" in order to make the 2S more efficiently without any confusions. This is how 2S started at Toyota.

Seiso

People added Seiso (Clean, the 3rd S) later, because Seiso (clean) is an important action that helps to make Seiri and Seiton activities more smooth and efficient. The first 3S (Seiri, Seiton & Seiso) are all verbs in grammar.

Seiketsu

After all these 3S (Seiri, Seiton & Seiso) are implemented, the workplace becomes clean (Seiketsu, the 4th S). This Seiketsu is an adjective in grammar.

Shitsuke

After these 4S are in place, people started to recognize the importance of keeping it regularly. So, Shitsuke (4th S), which means sustain in English, was added to make this practice a routine work. Some people mis-understand the meaning of this word of "sustain (Shitsuke in Japanese). They might take it as "forcing them to follow the rule/standard. It does not mean "to force people to observe the agreed rule" or "to mold people into one single way of doing things." But it rather means to ensure that people would do things voluntarily in the right/proper way without any

coaching or instructing by their bosses.

The first 4S (Seiri, Seiton, Seiso & Seiketsu) are basically focused on "things or goods", which the last S (Shitsuke) is focused on "people." I assume that the last S (Shitsuke) must have been added to 4S at a later timing. 4S items are all "things or goods" that has no personal feelings or emotions. On the contrary, Shitsuke (the 5th S) is focused on "human," not on "things or goods." Each human has his/her own feelings and emotions and it differs from one person to another. It is difficult to handle people's inconstant feelings or emotions, but this is the most important thing to make people serious about 4S items. My guess is that some wise people decided to add this 5th S (Shitsuke) to the existing 4S in order to keep a fair balance between "things/goods" and "human."

One last thing that came up to my mind. The main reason why 5S has prevailed across the company at Toyota is because the top management (executives and also key senior leaders at each division or department) are all serious about the concept of 5S. They have not only advocated its importance but they have also practiced it on a regular basis. They did not just put their hands in their pocket telling people to practice 5S. They actually took the leadership to make 5S prevail across the company. They showed their own seriousness on the 5S concept and actually practiced themselves. This has made a lot of difference. This is one of many reasons why 5S has been practiced and embedded in people's mind at Toyota for so many years. It's senior leaders' seriousness and leadership that makes a difference.

This is what comes up to my mind when I received your email. Please know this is just my understanding and does not necessarily reflect Toyota's formal comment, but I hope some of them might answer your request and help explain 5S to others.
— Isao Yoshino

For additional leadership insights visit:
LearningToLeadLeadingToLearn.com

