5S Yields Unexpected Benefits at Global Links

By Naida Grunden

Five years ago, the people at Global Links in Pittsburgh took a long look at the room they were using for the intake and storage of medical supplies. They didn’t like what they saw.

Global Links is a nonprofit organization with a two-fold mission: to improve health in struggling communities in Latin America and the Caribbean; and to divert still-useful supplies and equipment from landfills, rehabilitating it when needed.

When hospitals replace equipment with the latest versions, they are left with a lot of second-tier, but still excellent, equipment. Last year’s model of blood pressure cuff, for example, will be eagerly used in Nicaragua.

“We do the hard work of responding to the ‘pull’ for resources, not ‘pushing’ out whatever is convenient,” said Kathleen Hower, CEO and co-founder.

Referring to one nightmare scenario, Hower cites the time a batch of dialysis machines arrived in disrepair, a “gift” from a well-meaning nonprofit, on a loading dock in Port au Prince following the Haitian earthquake. But the machines arrived a propos of nothing, and sat unused, unwanted, untended—and became one more problem for the Haitians to solve.

Hower makes a strong point: “Global Links sends only what is needed, when and where it is needed. And we make sure that everything about the equipment is perfect. A missing cord can provoke a crisis to the recipient: folks in Havana can’t run to Radio Shack. The instruction guide must be in the language of the recipient. Everything must be there, and ready to go. Taking that kind of care to get it right every time is hard work.”

It turns out, it’s also the kind of work that lends itself to Lean thinking. The day the staff took an honest look at the storage room was the day after they’d completed their first learning sessions about Lean. They thought that the Lean technique of 5S could help them sort things out and make things run more efficiently.

5S in the Storage Area

The room was full of small equipment, like suction machines, ophthalmoscopes, nebulizers, surgical clippers, electronic thermometers, and blood pressure equipment.

“Anything with a cord, we piled,” said Angela Garcia, Deputy Director. “We would go back and try to find and pull things out, or ask volunteers to do it. We couldn’t see what was there. The storage room was a no-man’s land.”

Global Links was far from unique: most hospitals and organizations have such a room. After their initial training, staff members decided the storage room would be a great place to start.
The suggestion to begin a Lean transformation came from Global Links Board member, Mimi Falbo, RN, DNP, a former hospital CEO. Having led Lean transformations in hospitals and health centers, Mimi realized the value of Lean thinking in this nonprofit setting. Having a Board member conversant with Lean theory propelled the effort at Global Links.

First, they cleaned out the room (Sort, the first S). Then they posted photographs of each type of equipment. After all, not every new volunteer could identify a nebulizer on their first day. They categorized each type of equipment and placed them under the signs. (Set in order, the second S.)

Setting in order required them to sort the wheat from the chaff. Here was a piece of equipment that was too old, had been sitting too long. What is this thing anyway? Perhaps it’s time to recycle these items.

Once everything had been identified, it was cleaned (Shine, the third S), placed on a shelf, and flagged with the identifying picture. (See photo). They designated a shelf for incoming items, and trained volunteers how to identify, clean and put them away. Volunteers now specialize in certain product lines and ensure that those items are put on the proper shelf.

Standardizing the handling and placement of items and making them easy to see, with the visual cues of color-coding and photographs, comprises the fourth S: Standardize.

The fifth S is Sustain. How do we keep the room from assuming its former, cluttered appearance, and retain this new functionality we have established?

For Garcia, the answer isn’t about sustaining as much as it’s about continuously improving.

“During the 5S, we found a lot of large equipment that is expensive to rehabilitate, expensive to ship, and takes up a lot of our limited storage space. We also realized that we have comparatively little demand for these things. As an organization, we decided to stop handling them. We are handling small items that are constantly needed. You could say, in a way, that 5S helped us focus our mission,” she said.

Since that first 5S, Global Links found another warehouse space that fit their needs better. The space suited their equipment, reduced travel time of volunteers and staff members, made finding things easier. Lean thinking led them to the notion that their space should accommodate them, not vice versa.

And the 5S continues every day, with new improvements constantly being made by those at the frontline. Red tags if the box is heavy; alerts for easily confused names. People at the frontline test new improvements every day. Establishing a visual workplace following that initial 5S has been an essential part of this work.
Garcia points out that staff time and volunteer time are precious commodities for an organization like Global Links. Finding new and creative ways to reduce wasted time not only improves their efficiency, but shows respect to the people who work there, and ultimately, to their recipients.