10 Visual Management tips
10 Tips for Making Lean Work

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These ‘10 Tips’ were compiled by Matt as part of a presentation for Salford University.

Now presented as part of this handy guide, we’ve combined them with practical ‘Visual Management Expert’ advice, designed to help you assess and improve visual management in your organisation.
The Acid Test

Does everyone in your organisation know whether they are winning or losing ... and what was the reason for the outcome?

Have you ever noticed when you go to a park and watch children playing football it is easy to tell, even from 800 yards away whether they are just having a kick-around or they are playing for a score?

Fundamentally, we all want to be successful at what we do. We all want to know whether we are achieving our objectives. Put simply, we all want to know ‘The Score’

Our belief is that visual management that clearly communicates your score will engage your team, align their behaviors and channel their energies, simply by feeding our innate competitive desire for success.

Do your people know your score? Ask them. If the answer is no, you can only expect kick-around behaviors from your team. However, give them a scoreboard and you can only expect goals to be won!

VM expert says: “Track success with dashboard displays”

One of the most powerful traits of Lean is its immediacy, real-time reporting of progress and status ensures you always have an up-to-date picture and means problems can be resolved quickly.

Dashboard displays are a simple way to show current status at a glance. Their message is instantly clear to everybody, no matter what their role or what language they speak. Pointers make it simple and quick to update the information shown for responsive, informative displays that distil the very essence of your operations down to their purest form.
Identify Visual Deficits in your work environment

Is there visual information missing that impacts on your workers’ productivity or safety? Are all locations clearly marked? Are hazards and warnings clearly identifiable?

Improving safety is key to increasing productivity and is fundamental to any Lean strategy. The avoidance of serious workplace incidents is obviously paramount – but as an extension of this, ergonomic working also makes it physically easier for people to carry out their jobs. This in turn improves speed, productivity and morale. Put simply, the right process produces the right result.

Observe the working environment. Chances are you’re already identified the obvious hazards associated with equipment or machinery, so consider waste in areas like transport, motion and waiting. Look for narrow walkways, shared facilities requiring workers to walk back and forth, jumbled process flows and departments jostling for meeting or display space. Could your space be organized better? Could visual management make it easier and safer for people to move around?

VM expert says: “Conduct a visual audit today - Start at floor level and work up.”

Effective floor marking is essential to most visual management projects. Unlike wall or suspended signs, the floor is almost always within the peripheral vision of your personnel making it a powerful visual management resource.

Bold use of text and colour can help to segregate processes and departments, mark out walkways for safe movement of personnel and equipment, identify meeting areas and more. Are you using your floor space to its full potential?

Now you’ve discovered visual deficits affecting health and safety, can you see other areas where visual control is lacking?
Consistency is king

Many companies embarking on a Lean journey necessarily do so in a piecemeal fashion. It’s common to begin with one department or location and gradually roll out your strategy across the company – for most businesses, this is the only practical way to implement any new strategy.

The problem with this approach is that it can lead to inconsistencies – and where there is inconsistency, there is usually waste.

A successful visual management programme needs standardisation at its core. In global organisations, there is often much movement of personnel between locations. Using multiple suppliers in different locations brings in huge potential for inconsistency.

Standardisation both in terms of process and visual management helps to eliminate this and in doing so, reduce wastage of time and resources – it’s also essential for workplace safety. In an emergency, employees know exactly what to look out for and where to look.

Clarity has developed visual management products and methods that overcome the challenges of geography, logistics and culture, enabling effective monitoring of key metrics that can effortlessly span departments, locations – even continents.

VM expert says: “Consistent communication underpins Lean culture”

If you’ve rolled out Lean gradually across your organisation, you might be using various methods to convey similar information within different departments. Your visual management might even be super-basic – one of Clarity’s largest global clients used paper and sticky tape until we showed them a better way!

Investing in colour coordinated, branded visual management boards, floor tape, cleaning stations for your entire organisation may seem like an extravagance. But there’s real evidence to show that they help to engage employees, and make it much easier to move human and physical resources around for maximum efficiency.

Consistency of messaging makes it easy for workers to move between departments and still understand process flows and KPI monitoring at a glance. Maintaining a defined style throughout your business also helps to reinforce the message that the whole company is committed and united in pursuit of Lean.
Promote employee engagement through professionalism and corporate branding

It’s not enough for senior managers or a handful of trained employees to buy into Lean. For it to work, you must achieve a cultural change that encompasses every individual within your organisation, from elite management through to auxiliary staff.

This unilateral commitment (or lack thereof) is one of the main reasons companies may repeatedly try and fail to implement Lean. What one embraces wholeheartedly, another may reject. It can be hard to sustain the momentum.

With the right support in place, you’ll be able to implement your Lean strategy in a consistent way, taking time to work through problems as they arise and developing new habits of excellence in a collective manner.

You might have already heard this described as the ‘top down/bottom up’ approach – this is where management supports workers and workers support management.

What’s also fantastic is that visual management in this way conveys a friendly authority. It shows those working for the company that the business is 100% insisting on this approach whilst being non-confrontational and fair.

VM expert says: “Image is everything”

Are your staff proud of the visual management they are responsible for and is your corporate branding used consistently and correctly?

Visual management is one of your most powerful tools in achieving employee engagement. As well as providing vital information, high-performing visual management tools created using your corporate branding create a consistent image your team can be proud of. It’s brand recognition that extends beyond your product or service, to the very culture and ethos of your organisation. To achieve the best levels of employee engagement, visual management must be a two-way exercise with the opportunity to communicate both up and down all tiers. Employee suggestion boards, ideas boards and visual pulse surveys are all excellent tools for employee engagement.

Hint: Consider adopting a logo or slogan specifically for your Lean programme which will provide a visual link across all the elements of your scheme.
Ensure your visual management reflects your culture of continuous improvement

Can your visual management be easily evolved in a dynamic environment of change? How easy is it to update your visual management cost effectively and keep it looking professional?

VM expert says: “Can your VM adapt as you do?”

It sounds obvious, but you’d be surprised how many companies using visual management to drive change don’t leave room for the visual management tools themselves to evolve.

Your visual management should reflect the change mindset within your organisation. It must be flexible and easy to change when the need arises, without huge costs or loss of functionality.

Experience tells us that what can’t happen simply, often doesn’t happen at all! At Clarity we’ve developed a whole suite of products using drywipe surfaces, magnetic overlays, document frames and status magnets to help you create dynamic displays that can be instantly adapted to reflect the continuous improvement within your business.
Create ownership

Is there ownership of the visual management by those that are most able to deliver the improvements? What do you do to create ownership of the visual management in your workplace?

A culture where employees have the freedom to make appropriate decisions and the courage to take ownership, is the single most powerful, most desired, and least understood characteristic of a successful work environment.

This culture of ownership can begin with simple modifications to your visual management that encourage employees to make their own countermeasure decisions and convert them into meaningful actions recorded on their own visual action boards. Ownership of 5S can also be created through simple colour coded zones of 5S accountability, supported by shadow boards using the same colours for tool control.

This type of environment facilitates Lean by giving your workforce the confidence to make decisions independently, making your business more responsive and dynamic. Workers develop a problem-solving mentality that contributes to smoother process flows, sending both productivity and morale soaring.

So, select good people. Make sure they understand your company’s vision and its aims. Train them well, then let them fly. Your business will reap the rewards!

VM expert says: “Own your success”

How can visual management help to promote ownership of the departments in your workplace? How can you ensure that the people with potential to deliver improvements are fully engaged with your visual tools?

Intuitive design, correct positioning, branding and confidence are all critical in encouraging your employees to take ownership of (and actually use!) your visual management tools. Clarity’s visual management boards and other tools are designed for maximum simplicity and simplicity is the foundation all our visual management is built on.

The use of colour is also a very valuable tool to promote ownership. Visual tools can be used to denote processes, departments, teams and much more. Involving the user in the design of these tools is another powerful driver.
VM expert says: “Why not test your current visual management with the 1-3-10 rule of effective visual management”

Though the information they contain can differ enormously, what effective visual management boards always share in common is the 1-3-10 rule:

- Understand the purpose of the board in 1 second
- Understand the current status in 3 seconds
- Understand any countermeasures applied in 10 seconds
Less is more

While Lean can seem daunting at first, many business owners reach a point where they’re so enthusiastic about its potential that they want to measure EVERYTHING. More often than not, this leads to a phenomenon referred to as ‘analysis paralysis’ – where you have so many metrics being monitored, you don’t know what to improve first.

You need a Lean approach to your Lean approach. Be ruthless. Decide which areas of your business have the biggest impact on performance, and establish a key set of metrics that gives a clear picture of your progress towards your goals.

With fewer metrics to focus on, you’ll be free to ensure the reporting of data is clear and accurate enough to result in tangible improvements.

Remember: successful visual management can be read ‘at a glance’.

VM expert says: “Simplicity is brilliance”

The power of visual management lies in its simplicity and in its speed. Your displays should be large, clear and easily understood. When deciding what to display, only go for measures that really drive results.

Decide on an acceptable time frame in which any user can read and understand the status of your key measures. For example, 60 seconds is considered as the accepted amount of time it should take for a visitor to identify the flow of work through a manufacturing facility – how does yours measure up?

Your visual management should be continually monitored, tested and changed to ensure it stays within these agreed efficiency parameters.
Does it change behaviours?

Simply displaying lots of information and data doesn’t change behaviours, but visual management that encourages countermeasure actions to be identified, assigned and completed, does!

VM expert says: “Do your visual management boards have an actions area and is it being used? Does it display completion dates, action owners and action status?”

A correctly constructed action area on your visual management board can convert a board simply displaying data into a powerful management tool for our teams’ behaviours, encouraging them to priorities the tasks that really matter.
Use It!

How often is a meeting held by the whole team to review your visual management and is it effective in creating change?

Meetings are essential to keep the job on track and the team engaged. Have designated meeting areas and fixed meeting times. Make attendance compulsory and document actions (who/what/when) and decisions.

A designated control room where all the key data is on display avoids distractions and promotes timeliness.

VM expert says: “Create space for visual management”

Create a designated control room where all key data is updated and displayed, and use this area for regular, compulsory meetings at fixed times. Use visual management in these meetings to keep projects on track, identify and solve problems before they impact on progress and ensure the full team is engaged with the targets and goals of the project.

Record actions arising from these meetings and regularly use them for evaluation of your VM tools themselves, ensuring the whole team is on track and engaged with both the job at hand and the overall Lean strategy.
The acid test of visual management is whether everyone in your organisation knows the score today ... how can you expect to win if you don’t know the score.

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