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Thinking People

Leader Standard Work: Love it or not, it works!

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I can't help smiling when I mention Standard Work to leaders. Sometimes they cringe at the thought of it and I can appreciate that. But I have to admit I've seen it help sustain some pretty impressive improvements. Let's begin by looking at process-related Standard Work and then dig into Leader Standard Work. It may just entice you to see where it can add value to the change effort as an integral part of the Management System.

The Basics of Process Standard Work

There is a difference between having a standard and achieving Standard Work. A *standard* is a rule or example that provides clear guidance—an unambiguous specification of how we define quality and how defects can be avoided. It is precise and documented.

Standard Work on the other hand, refers to the Current Condition of work carried out—how well the process conforms to the standard's ideals. It is the daily practice of achieving the standard.

To evaluate Standard Work, go to Gemba, look for the standard and scan through it. It should be a visual, one-page document, visibly located somewhere close to the operation. Then stand and observe the process for a few cycles and assess how well it conforms to the standard. Quite often, the process deviates from the norm. Eureka! This is your first opportunity to improve the work. Once the process has been stabilised and Standard Work accomplished, the process can be further improved and new standards set.

'Without standards there can be no Kaizen'

We want to work to standard first, and then seek to change for the better. This is not always a simple matter. Often standards are not available, poorly written or hidden in drawers. It remains important to nevertheless conduct this exercise. Figure 1 (adapted from LIA ITL, 2014) illustrates the way in which the improvement approach considers the standard and improves with the help of repeated PDCA cycles.

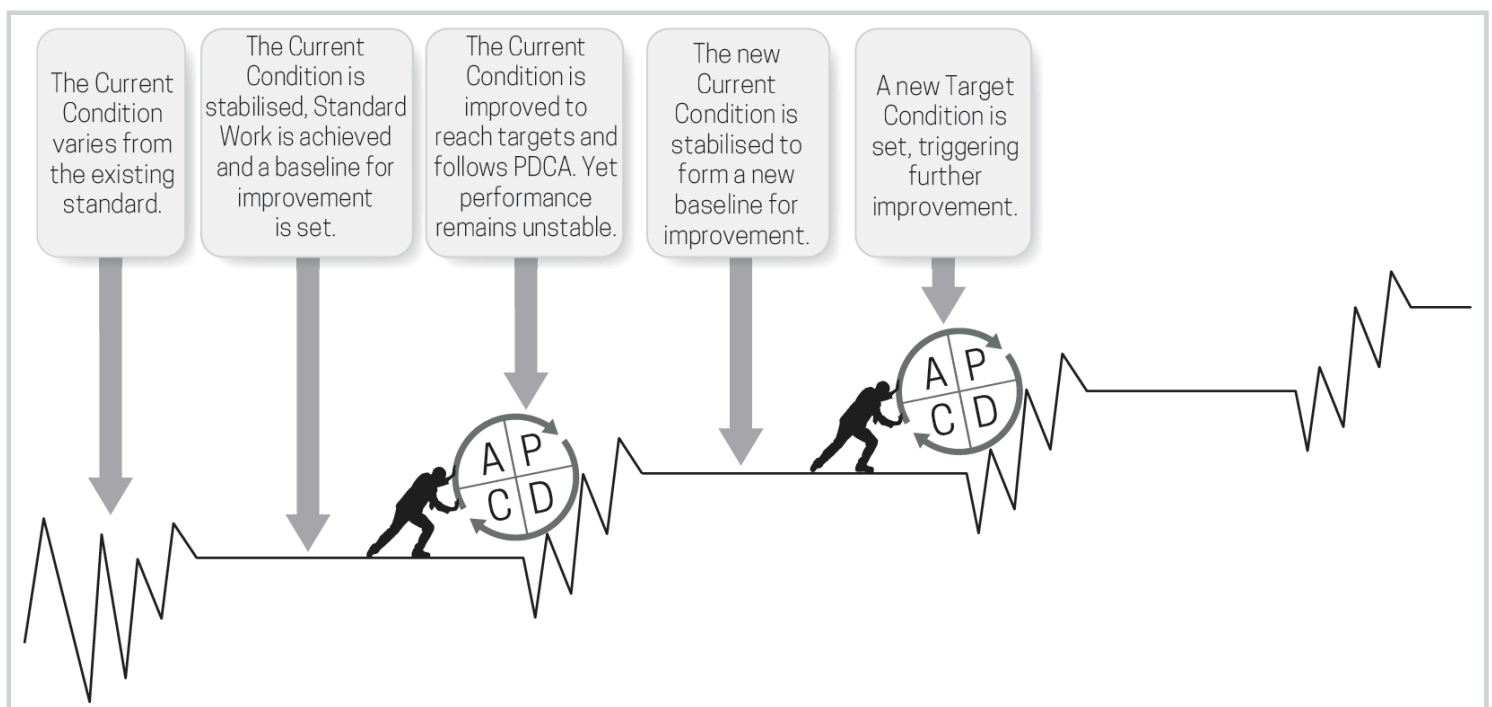


Figure 1: Iterating towards the Target Condition by putting Standard Work and Current Condition through repeated PDCA cycles

How is the standard used?

- Team members refers to the standard to give guidance to work.
- The team leader or supervisor compares the Current Condition performance to the standard and coaches the employee accordingly.
- When a new employee is trained, the standard is used to train them in the correct methods to assure the quality required. Later, when compliance is assessed, this is assessed against the standard.

The concept of Standard Work may at first appear rigid. Yet it sets the very benchmarks that make flexibility possible. The management mantra, ‘We cannot change what we do not measure’, applies. If standards are in place, teams carry out their Standard Work always adjusting to meet the standard’s ideals. Once the baseline is stable, the team is empowered to improve on the standard through cycles of PDCA. Over time and with experience, an organisation can even permit employees to develop their own process standards—a desirable outcome of striving towards excellent Standard Work. Armed with good standards and basic problem-solving training, everyone can run controlled experiments, every day, to improve towards the Target Condition. In this way, employees are empowered and equipped to define and improve processes but always under the guidance and support of their leaders.

What should a standard include?

- The content of the work to be performed is specified line-by-line
- The sequence in which the work is completed is clear
- The timing indicates how long each element of work should be, or how long the task should optimally take
- The outcome is specific so that the quality of the work can be established.

Taking a closer look at Leader Standard Work





Every leader (team leader, supervisor manager etc.) wears two hats.

One hat represents the daily work needed to get the job done and includes basic requirements specific to the position.

The second hat represents the leader's responsibility to nurture a culture of continuous improvement and lead by example in all that they do.

Improvement efforts are woven into the very fabric of leader's daily activities, seen as must-haves and carefully guarded during high-pressure periods when time spent on improvements is most likely to be threatened. They are integral to their mandate and should be written into a job description or contract's key performance indicators.

Even the most ingenious new ways of doing things or the most useful improvement to a process can fall away if not deliberately and stubbornly protected. Whether intentional or not, people easily slip back into old ways of working. Until such time as improvements are innate to team members, leaders must dedicate daily or weekly time to evaluating the performance of a new system, and guiding the team to sustain it and feed its longevity. Here, Leader Standard Work can have a major influence on the sustainability of change and ultimately the preservation of a Lean culture.

To some, the concept of Leader Standard Work may appear unconventional. Leaders may argue that their work varies from day to day and that the idea of ‘standardising’ it will only stifle their ability to perform. But we urge leaders to consider the portion of their day actually spent on work that varies. They are likely to find a large proportion of what they do is in fact repetitive—and so perfect for standardisation. Furthermore, it is often inconsistent decision-making that introduces errors and other forms of variability. Of course we cannot standardise the entire spectrum of a leader’s work. There will always be a portion that requires creativity, innovation and flexibility.

To illustrate the point, a pharmacy redesigned their lines and replaced uncontrolled batch sizes with a four-piece-flow—only four patient files allowed into the process at any one time. Team roles were carefully designed around this preferred flow. The outcome? Four-piece-flow, coupled with other changes, slashed patient waiting times by up to 68 percent within a few days.

The incredible impact on patients convinced the team of the benefits of the new approach. Even so, it did not take long for the improvements experienced to waiver as only the team directly involved in the switch to four-piece-flow understood the change. Other lines were still performing in the old way, using uncontrolled batch sizes. In time, even the model team’s performance started slipping.

This is exactly the sort of scenario that Leader Standard Work can control. If a supervisor and area manager regularly visit the line and compare the Current Condition to the new standard developed, they will observe the obstacles to sustaining the change and be able to support and coach team members. This is what leaders at the pharmacy in question did. After a few weeks, the performance of all teams stabilised to the new standard. But, not without resilience on the part of the leadership who were utterly determined to safeguard the new conditions.

Remember that the [Daily Management System](#) and Visual Controls clearly communicate the health of your organisation or work area’s Current Condition. Daily Accountability processes (meetings and problem-solving exercises) ensure performance is always being scrutinised through the lens of PDCA. Leader Standard Work offers routine support and guidance when

the team is struggling to maintain momentum and stimulates further improvement.

What does it take to develop Leader Standard Work?

Figure 2 includes elements of Hat 1 (processes specific to the job) and of Hat 2 (the promotion of continuous improvement). These key ingredients develop Leader Standard Work or, a leader's standard routines. A useful tool that many leaders use to keep their work on track is the old-fashioned checklist. A word of caution to leaders: where possible, keep checklists simple. Lengthy checklists lose their impact and become yet another laborious document.

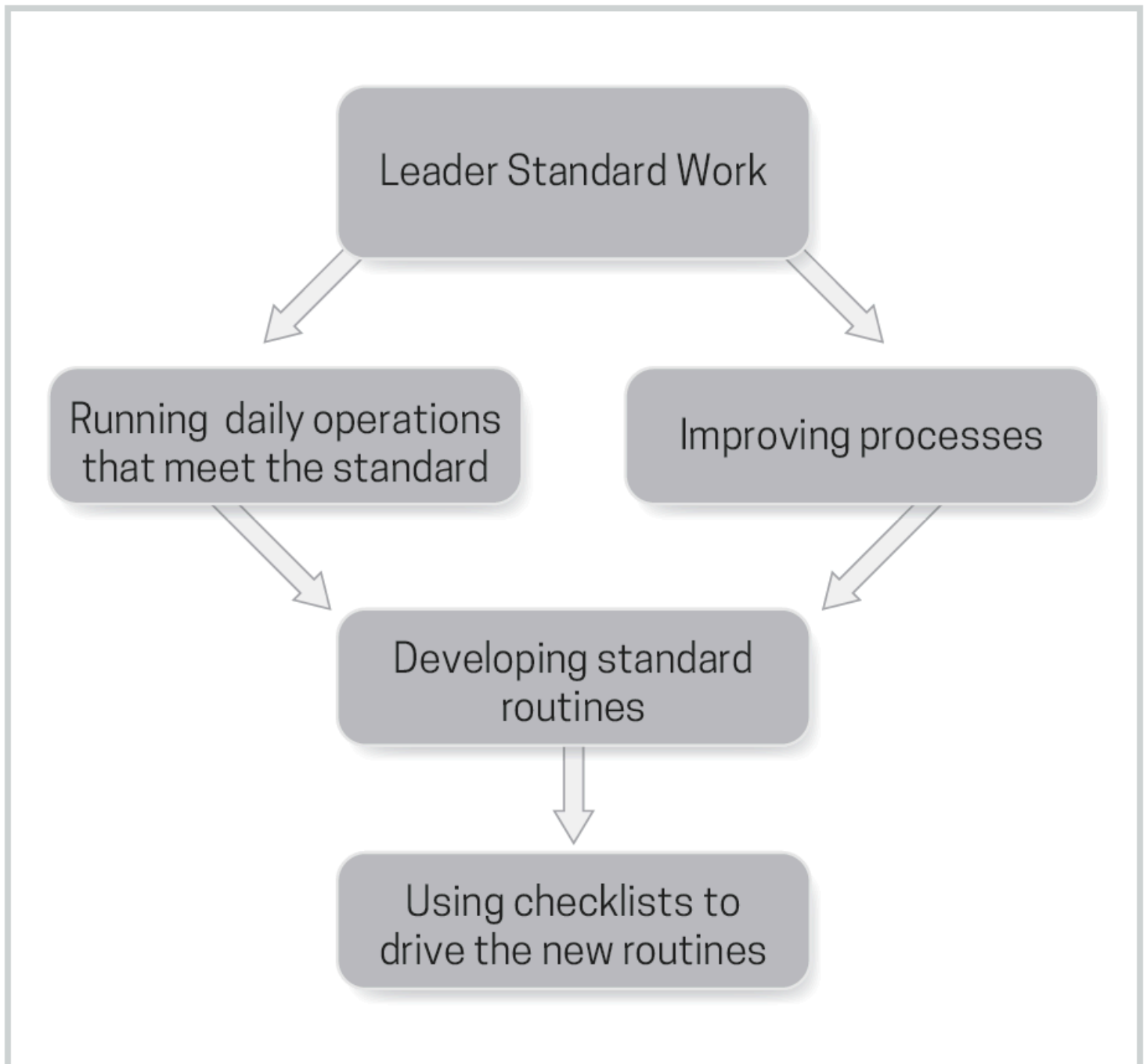


Figure 2: The process of developing Leader Standard Work

What does a good checklist entail?

Table 1 provides a starting point for an effective checklist. It contains the routines a leader will need to drive continuous improvement. Leaders need to add elements from Hat 1 to this and then *customise* it to deliver on the habits required.

LEADER STANDARD WORK CHECKLIST						
FOCUS	TIME	TEAM LEADER	TIME	SUPERVISOR	TIME	MANAGER
GEMBA WALK	07h00 to 07h30	- Walk floor as per agenda - Review performance to standard, 5S condition, progress with actions - Use Kata questions and provide guidance	07h00 to 07h30	- Walk selected floor as per agenda - Review performance to standard, 5S condition, progress with actions - Use Kata questions and provide guidance	07h00 to 07h30	- Walk selected floor as per agenda - Review performance to standard, 5S condition, progress with actions - Use Kata questions and provide guidance
MEETING PLANNING	07h30 to 07h50	- Summarise Gemba Walk findings - Review priorities - Review labour availability	07h30 to 07h50	- Summarise Gemba Walk findings - Plan agenda	07h30 to 07h50	- Summarise Gemba Walk findings - Plan agenda
S3 MEETING	08h00 to 08h15	- Leads S3 meeting as per agenda - Problem solving initiated where needed for 5S and performance - Action list updated as per PDCA	08h00 to 08h15	Attend one S3 Meeting per week		
S2 MEETING			08h30 to 08h45	- Leads S2 meeting as per agenda - Problem solving initiated for escalated items - Action list updated as per PDCA	08h30 to 08h45	Attend one S2 meeting per week
S1 MEETING					09h00 to 09h30	- Leads S1 meeting as per agenda - Problem solving initiated for escalated items - Action list updated as per PDCA
5S	Weekly (Tuesday)	- Conduct 5S audit and update Daily Management System - Guide daily actions to address weekly findings	Weekly (Monday)	- Conduct 5S audit rotating between areas - Discuss findings with S1 leaders	Monthly	- Conduct 5S audit rotating between areas - Discuss findings with S2 leaders

Table 1: Example of a Leader Standard Work Checklist for Continuous Improvement elements

Something for you to think about:

- Look at your current work content (job descriptions can also provide input)
- Identify key elements that lend themselves to routines and foster continuous improvement practices
- Put together a schedule of routines illustrating the regular activities to be done, by whom, when and how frequently
- Use checklists where needed just to get the right routines habitual— checklists fall away once the routines are established and internalised.

For more information to support your improvement journey, refer to [Clear Direction](#) (Heathcote, 2014) and [Making a Difference](#) (Heathcote, 2016).



- ▶ What problem are you trying to solve?
- ▶ How will you engage staff to help you?
- ▶ How will you get it done?



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Good read, thanks

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