

I-CAR[®] ADVANTAGE Online™

Technical Information For The Collision Industry

THE BUZZ ON EFFICIENCY

Everyone in the collision repair industry has no doubt heard the buzzwords around improving efficiency. In this time of trying to avoid the spiraling whirlpool of the current business economy, the “buzz” has likely caught your attention.

Catch phrases like lean process, cycle time improvement, repair blueprinting, eliminating waste, continuous process improvement, the five S’s, and SOPs make up some of the buzz. What does this have to do with collision repair? A lot, if you pay attention to some of the success stories where the result means a less chaotic repair environment.

Imagine a technician yelling at the parts manager while running around looking for a clip similar to the one that just broke on the vehicle scheduled to be delivered in one hour. Now imagine an assembly technician calmly reaching into a plastic container and pulling out the exact clips needed for the trim panel he just pulled off a nearby parts cart. Instead of a customer asking why a ding in the door is still there, picture a delivery technician politely pointing out the repaired door that the customer had previously agreed would be part of the repair, even though it was not damaged in this collision. There are no “firemen” putting out daily fires, because the fires simply don’t exist.

In the efficient repair facility, every vehicle is having something done to it during the entire time it is on the repair floor. Several vehicles are being delivered every day of the week on a schedule that was known before any of the repairs ever began. Collision repair is an orderly, evenly paced, standard process that does not alter when a key technician is on vacation. The repair cycle time for all vehicles is an average of four to five calendar days. There may be a separate lane for small repairs that are in and out of the facility in one or two days. There is more open space in the repair facility, every repair bay and storage area looks clean, everything looks organized, tools are visible and in proper place (see Figure 1). Everyone working in the facility is happy to be there and enjoys what they are doing, a result of being able to get things done in a more efficient way.

The conditions at these facilities didn’t appear overnight. The manager didn’t come back from a two-day seminar with an aura of self-awareness, armed with some software updates and new tools for everyone, and proceed to craft some magic on his own. Instead, after listening to and witnessing the daily chaos one too many times, there was likely some soul searching, several discussions held, several decisions made, and a different thought



Figure 1– Everything visual and in its place is a big help to improving the efficiency of a repair facility.

process began to develop among everyone in the facility. A mission began that will never actually end.

CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT FROM EVERYONE

Why no end? Workplaces that have decided to change share a common theme: wherever they are right now, and regardless of when they started the improvement mission, they are still on the road to improvement. Continuous improvement, as it is called (“kaizen” in Japanese), is another popular term.

At first, what appears to be a collection of techniques and tips aimed only at managers and supervisors is much more than that. In fact, it is not a management system at all, but a way of thinking designed for everyone in the workplace. Everyone must be on board and be willing to change, or the mission will not be successful.

Suggestions for improving processes must be welcome from anyone and although management may have started the wheels turning, the implementation of ideas and ensuring that the nuggets of success will follow requires input and involvement from all levels.

Cycle time — the time from which the key is handed over to a repair facility until the time it is handed back to the customer — is affected by everyone at the repair facility. It is not only the technicians who do the actual repairs, but everyone from the receptionist and other front office staff to the technician or supervisor that delivers the vehicle after detailing. In a sense, everyone is a customer, since each department is an internal customer of the next department in the process.

“SOPs,” or standardized operating procedures, is another term that has made its way into repair facilities. SOPs are not a set of rules that the manager writes down then tells the staff “this is how we’ll do things from now on.” Doing a job “the way the boss wants it” may work in some cases, but only goes so far. Without understanding the “whys,” and without having a voice in creating procedures, there is no ownership and little incentive to sustain (one of the five S’s).

SOPs must be introduced, discussed, and agreed upon by the people who will do the work. They must remain flexible and open to review or change when repairs in the real world uncover necessary tweaks in the list. When SOPs are developed correctly, they ensure an outcome that can be repeated.

An SOP in the metal shop area, for example, may specify always finishing body filler work to a specific grit, stepping up no more than 100 grit at a time, and sanding out to a specific grit. In the next stage of the process, the technician in the refinishing prep area then knows that masking for primer can begin as soon the vehicle arrives. Because the SOP was followed, there is no need to slow down the repair

spending time assessing the area for imperfections such as pinholes. The technician knows that this was already handled in the previous stage, regardless of who did it. Once an SOP is developed, it can be posted in the appropriate repair bay (see Figure 2). But don’t make the posting too permanent!

THE THOUGHT OF CHANGE

Do the buzzwords of “lean” and “continuous improvement” have meaning to the collision repair industry? You bet they do. Repair facilities that have embarked on the mission know that these principles and ideas affect them, and they’re beginning to reap the benefits. Those who were around when the change began wouldn’t be able to tell you exactly when the repair process suddenly became easier and more enjoyable. They can, however, think back and wonder how a repair ever got done when repairs were done “the old way.” They may also wonder why no one at the time thought anything about why the repair process was so chaotic or that there was even another way to run a collision repair facility.

Pay attention to the buzz. There’s something in it for everyone in this industry.

For comments or suggestions on the Advantage Online, please contact I-CAR at advantage@i-car.com.

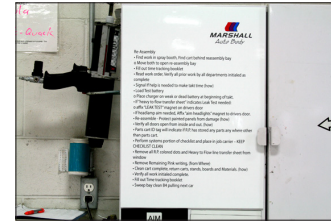


Figure 2— Another part of being visual is a reminder list of the agreed-upon SOP for that repair bay.