Seeing Is Believing
How the New Art of Visual Management Can Boost Performance Throughout Your Organization

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Introduction
Imagine an organization that’s a work of art, one that uses all the effective management tools and also the tools of the artist to produce an environment that’s more than just a bunch of words — an environment that captures the mission, vision and guiding principles of the organization with a compelling image on a single page.

Imagine a physical plant that’s bright, airy and open, one that has the most effective workflow and a workspace that allows people both to concentrate on their individual tasks and to work together as a team.

Imagine a workplace in which the walls, floors and ceilings are decorated in a co-ordinated set of pictures, sculptures, banners, flags and other displays, all designed to link people directly to the organization’s mission.

Imagine a workplace that’s so visually coherent that it can instantly shape the impression or point of view of the outside world the minute a visitor enters. Visually, this would be a place that’s special, a place that’s filled with innovation and creativity.

Now imagine that same workplace as a place in which information is shared to an unprecedented degree, and shared with all employees in many different forms. Imagine that the organization’s employees know and understand the metrics and performance measures, and are working together as a group to try to achieve them.

Imagine that the performance of the units and individual employees is posted, that all employees know exactly how they’re doing relative to everybody else, that there are mechanisms in place to help low performers improve, and that high-performing teams and individuals are rewarded accordingly.

Imagine a workplace in which people are celebrated in employee galleries that display photos of individuals and work teams, of the union leadership, of employee events and of new and even former employees. That would be an environment in which employees felt truly appreciated by their employer and an environment so compelling that it would help to recruit and retain top-notch talent. It would be a focused and effective workplace.

What Is Visual Management?
That workplace would be one where visual management was in place. Visual management is a system for organizational improvement that can be used in almost any type of organization to focus attention on what’s important and to improve performance across the board. It adds a new dimension to the process, systems and structures that make up the existing organization by using strong graphic visualization techniques to heighten its focus on performance.

This innovative management system adds visible and visual depth and consistency to an organi-
zation’s messages about its mission and goals. It keeps information about the mission, goals and performance in front of employees at all times. And it does this in the most visual way possible by converting information about the company, its customers and its performance into graphic displays that cannot be ignored. Visual management appeals directly to the high level of visual literacy that exists in today’s workforce.

Organizations that have applied visual management have received performance improvements that include:

- 30% improvement in customer satisfaction.
- 33% reduction in rework.
- 35% improvement in overall productivity.
- 20% improvement in accuracy.

Anticipate Outcomes

Productivity improvements are typical. In a visual management environment, each employee becomes actively accountable for his/her performance, in terms of building expertise through training or education, applying that knowledge on the job, and ensuring that s/he is performing up to expectation. Skill matrices keep people abreast of which skills they’ve mastered and which ones they need to improve.

Performance results are posted at the organization, unit and individual level to ensure that everyone knows how the performance results are achieved. Low performers are encouraged in positive ways to improve, and they’re given an incentive to do so. Results become transparent in a visual management system, and it becomes easier to identify gaps and address them quickly.

Costs are typically reduced, often through increased awareness of controllable costs and reductions in rework. Employees who know exactly what’s expected of them, who are well trained to deliver and who know how they’re performing at any given moment tend to focus their effort on doing things well. Those who are given straightforward cost information and taught how to use it pay more attention to the costs they can control and tend to reduce scrap and other waste. As a result, they improve the quality of their work and reduce costs at the same time.

The ability to serve customers also rises, often dramatically, in organizations that employ visual management. Organizations use it to turn their cultures around and help their employees truly understand who the customers are and what they need. By connecting employees to the organization’s mission and customers, visual management helps an organization become more sensitive to customer needs, find new ways to meet those needs, and enhance overall customer satisfaction.

Employee satisfaction also rises. People want to be part of a winning team. When they see that their organization is actively involved in a major improvement effort that includes them, when they begin to see the positive impact of this effort, and when they begin to feel that their contributions count, their outlook on work and organization typically changes accordingly.

Employees are also grateful that performance problems are finally being addressed. They all understand how they’re doing relative to their goals and their peers, and they all understand that action will be taken if poor performers don’t improve, so there are few surprises and relatively fewer grievances.

Developing Alignment

Visual management is a process that focuses on developing a critical link between a carefully defined mission, a set of operating systems and structures that align with that mission, and the desired performance outcomes of an organization.

An organization considering visual management must review, and often refine, its systems and structures as part of the implementation process. It must align strategies and systems, and show workers exactly what they need to do, how they need to do it, and what level of performance is required to meet the goals.

At the individual level,
visual management brings two critical contributions. First, it keeps the organization’s missions and goals in front of people at all times, leaving no room for misunderstanding or inattention. It provides clarity of purpose that keeps people working on the right things.

Second, it focuses great attention on group and individual performance, helping people understand where they’re doing well and where they need to improve. It takes the surprises out of performance reviews by providing all employees with consistent and very frequent feedback. At the same time, it celebrates employees’ accomplishments and shows them how valuable they are to the organization.

How Does It Work?
Displays that deal with the organization’s mission are designed to connect the employees to the mission, so they’re excited and intrigued by it, and therefore feel emotional about it. Those displays are updated periodically to maintain heightened interest and to avoid the staleness that so often results from lack of change on a bulletin board or other visual display. In the visual management environment, people check displays frequently since the information is updated and changed regularly.

Customers typically feel celebrated when they enter a visual management workplace. The mission statements and goals reflect a direct customer focus, the displays introduce and highlight what customers do and want, customer feedback and survey data are prominently posted for all to see, and it becomes clear that the customer is central to the organization’s success.

At Columbus Regional Hospital, for example, an exemplary history wall has been developed that depicts the organization’s roots and transitions over the years. The strategic plan is shown through a simple graphic of eggs for goals such as satisfaction, financial, quality and safety, and growth and innovation — with a chick bursting out of the last one for achievement of the plan. When a staff member in surgical services at the hospital is singled out for extraordinary service in a patient satisfaction survey, his or her name is added to the Surgical Services Superstar board for all to see.

At UltraViolet Devices Inc., a work instruction chart on the wall explains each step of the assembly process for each manufacturing job, including safety requirements. A photo shows each step, along with a verbal explanation. Quality criteria are emphasized as well.

The Teamsters union has a kiosk in its headquarters that tells about the organization’s history. It also has photos on the wall celebrating great moments from that history.

The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs has a full-size Huey helicopter cockpit to which sound has been added so visitors and employees can see, feel and hear what it was like for service personnel. One wing of the department’s offices has photos celebrating every employee.

Getting Started
Implementing visual management is a six-phase process:

1. **Planning.** The process starts with the development and refinement of the mission, vision and core values of the organization. It’s crucial that the goals and priorities be clarified and understood, since they become guides for the entire effort. Concurrent with this effort, the concept of visual management must be introduced to key players in the organization, including, but not limited to, all managers, supervisors, union leaders and other key constituents.

2. **Building a Framework.** Ensure the organization has the appropriate structure and systems to carry out its mission properly. At this point, the organization starts to prepare for change. Others in the organization are educated about visual management, and assessments are made about what changes are needed to implement the process.

3. **Creating the Space.** An in-depth analysis is made of the physical layout in which the work is being carried out and of the work flow processes, along with
an assessment of the management systems being used. The primary analytic goal is to determine whether the physical space and workflow patterns are consistent with the work that needs to be done.

An audit is carried out to determine whether the furniture, cabinets and shelves are functional and whether their condition is consistent with the organizational design. A review is also held to determine the best place for metrics to be posted and, once that’s done, along with a plan for posting results, the focus shifts to finding out if the people systems are appropriate, with employees knowing what’s expected of them and being held accountable.

4. Focusing on Customers and Data. Attention now turns to drawing attention to the mission and data. This is one of the most robust and exciting phases, with visual cues added and people starting to see that something is very different in the organization.

The initial phase is typically on the mission as it relates to customers and other stakeholders, with images depicting customers and the work installed throughout the facility. Work is also begun on displays tracing the history of the products or services provided by the organization and their link to customers and suppliers. In this phase, a great deal of attention is paid to developing the data systems that will inform all organization members about performance and results. “War rooms” are established — in such places as lunchrooms — where individual performance data can be displayed.

5. Focusing on Employees and Fine-Tuning Details. Now the organization really begins to focus on the employees and people systems, while at the same time fine-turning the visual management elements that were implemented in the first four phases. Critical data is posted for teams. The selected data must be directly relevant to what the team is doing. It should consist of only a few key pieces of information that are updated as frequently as possible. People are therefore not overwhelmed, they feel connected to the data and they understand how their work affects results.

6. Renewing the Process. This phase provides a time to make adjustments to the system. The organization is now a different place from what it was when the visual management system was initially implemented, and early elements may no longer fit.

Conclusion
Visual management is flexible enough to accommodate most budgets, and the budgets are spread out over a multi-year period. Some organizations have spent less than $50,000 on overall visual management, while others have committed more than $400,000 to the effort over two to five years. If there’s a will to implement visual management, the organization will find a way to make it happen, regardless of budget — and the organization and customers will benefit.

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