

# *Organizing for Greater Bonsai Success*

**5Ps, 5S Lean &  
Form Follows Function**

**Rusty McMains  
October 2025**



**Bonsai holds various meanings for different people. Like any new pursuit or pastime, people are drawn to it for diverse reasons and generally have additional motivations for fully committing to it. Among those who embrace bonsai as a serious hobby, there appear to be three primary categories of enthusiasts.**

**The first and largest group consists of individuals who own one or more trees, join a local bonsai club, and enjoy bonsai in their leisure time. ??????**

**The second, more specialized group comprises those whose interest in bonsai has developed into a genuine profession. These bonsai practitioners**

**have honed their skills to the point of being recognized as professional bonsai artists and bonsai masters, and are acknowledged as experts in the art of bonsai, making a living from their craft.**

**Lastly, there is a third group that perceives bonsai as far more than just a hobby, demonstrating a greater level of dedication and commitment than the average enthusiast. For these individuals, bonsai is an avocation, a passionate pursuit that they engage in for its numerous benefits. Although bonsai may not be linked to a job or career, it goes beyond simple leisure, becoming an integral part of their identity.**

**I fall into this third group. I'm not quite sure yet if that's a blessing or a curse.**





**Throughout my short Bonsai journey, people have consistently remarked how organized I am and that I always to have the right tools at the ready. I think everyone has experienced the frustration of having to interrupt what they are doing because they did not have the needed tool or resource. While I have not used every tool in my toolbox or only used a tool only once or twice, it will be there when it is needed.**

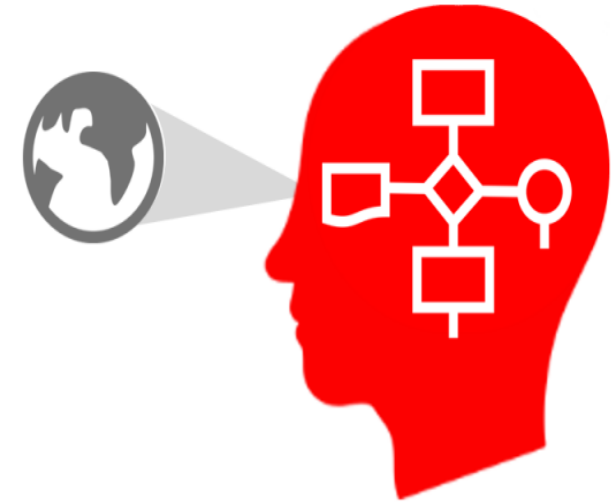
**With 50+ years of experience as a martial arts instructor, which includes over 20 years on the seminar circuit and more than 10 years as a martial business consultant, alongside a 25-year professional journey as an Operational and Compliance Manager for a global logistics and supply chain leader, I have come to understand that both mental and physical organizational skills are as vital as any theoretical or practical abilities. Whether I am developing curriculums or overseeing systems through standardized operating procedures (SOPs) and scopes of work (SOWs) that include work instructions and competence assessment tools, effective organization remains key.**





**Mental organization is equally important and refers to the way we structure our thoughts, ideas, and mental processes, while physical organization deals with how we arrange physical items and spaces.**

**A mental model is:**  
'an explanation of someone's **thought process** about how something works in the real world'.



**While both types of organization are important for improving efficiency and productivity, they function in different ways. The key to effectively realizing any model is subject to the method's goals and degree of implementation. In the following, I offer 3 very simple methodologies I apply to most every situation in my personal and professional life: **6P Motto, 5S Lean and Form Follows Function.****



## **6P Motto: *Proper Prior Planning Prevents Poor Performance***

The **6P Motto** is a widely adopted phrase emphasizing the importance of detailed planning to avoid mistakes and ensure success. Preparedness requires both a physical and intellectual effort. It isn't a far stretch to suggest that we are not genetically engineered to be expert "preparers" and that many of our successes in life are in spite of ourselves.



The 6Ps reminds us that true success cannot be achieved by simply "winging it". Still, we need a methodology to implement the 6Ps and this is where 5S Lean comes into play.



# 5S Lean - “*Inspect what you expect!*”

**5S Lean** is a Japanese manufacturing platform that emphasizes a systematic approach to workplace organization and standardization.

The following slides provide a high-level outline of the goals and implementation examples for each of the 5S.





# ***Seiri*** (整理) ***Sort*** (*Prepare*)

## **Objective:**

**Start with a clean slate. Clear and prep the area where you'll be working prior to starting the task, including your tools and surrounding floor space.**

## **Implementation:**

- a. Understand what tools and resources you will need to perform that task.**
- b. Remove everything else from the workspace.**
- c. Minimize clutter and debris in your workspace throughout.**
- d. Give yourself plenty of room.**



# ***Seiton (整頓): Set in Order; Straighten***

## **Goal:**

**Set the “dinner table”. Organize your tools and equipment, making it easy to find what's needed, saving time from having to stop to find a missing tool.**

## **Implementation:**

**Organize your workstation so that all tools and resources are conveniently arranged logically, with each item placed in a designated spot. Position tools and resources based on their usage frequency, keeping the most commonly used items closest to the workspace.**





# **Seiso (清掃): Sweep**

## **Goal:**

Ensure the workplace is kept clean and free of debris and clutter throughout the task.

## **Implementation:**

Clean your workplace, tools and equipment “as you go” (high frequency cleaning interval). This also includes inspecting the workplace and equipment while cleaning.



# **Seiketsu (清潔) Standardize\***

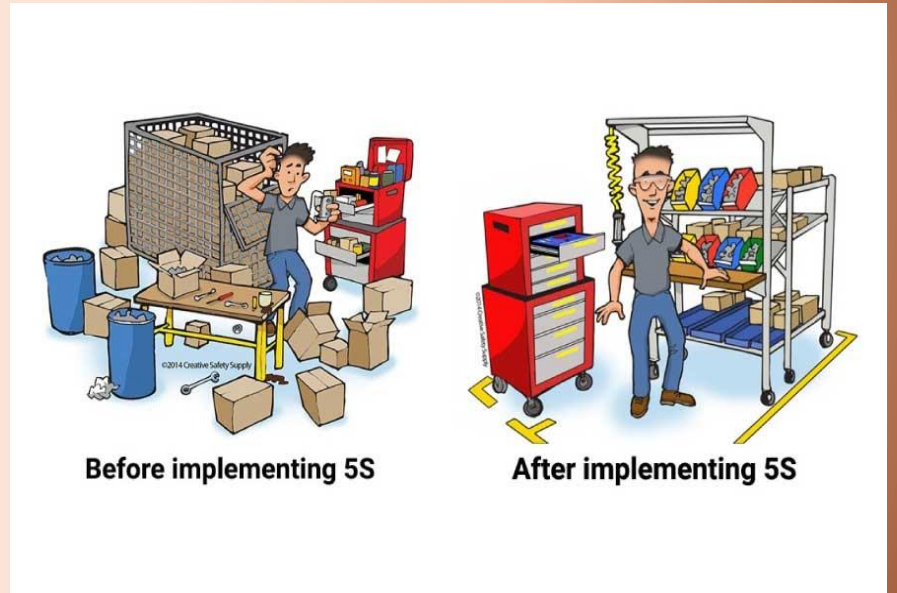
*\*The literal translation for seiketsu is to maintain hygiene and cleanliness. The term “standardize” is used to suit the 5S acronym.*

## **Goal:**

The Standardize step is a bridge between the first three 5S steps (Sort, Straighten, Shine) and the last step (Sustain). In this step, your goal is to develop a routine to maximize physical and time management efficiency.

## **Implementation:**

Develop your own defined flow process yet flexible enough to allow you to expand and incorporate new processes and make them a part of the usual routine. Use visual and physical controls to better manage order.



# ***Shitsuke (躰): Sustain\****

*\*Literal translation is “Discipline”*

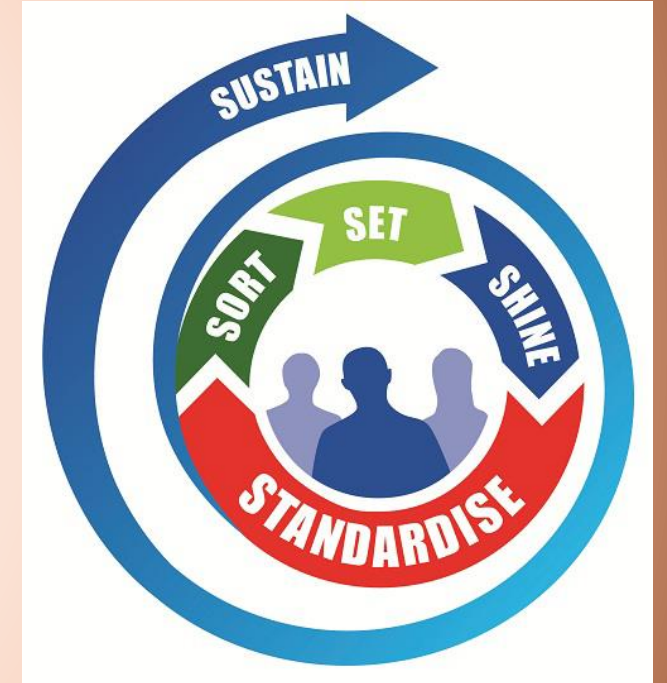
## **Goal:**

**Develop a good, solid “do without being told to do” culture; be consistent and try not to stray. This will also help when updating any routine to include new skills and practices.**

## **Implementation:**

**Organize routines based on the process, your personal experiences and preferences, and make improvements whenever possible.**

***Note: This is where the ideals of kaizen (改善) (“good change’ or continual improvement) can be applied. Kaizen emphasizes continuous improvement in all aspects of an organization or activity.***







This brings us to the final organizational principle:  
**“Form Follows Function”**

Originally an architectural concept, it suggests that the design of an object should be dictated by its intended use. This idea encourages us to consider the importance of ‘why’ before ‘what’.

We see this in the design of the various tools we use in bonsai. When we harmonize form with function, everything aligns, creating a more aesthetically pleasing and meaningful world.



Before we can apply Form Follows Function, 5Ps or 5S, we must first define the function of the space? Does it involve pruning and styling trees, repotting and soil work, tool use and maintenance, displaying or observing bonsai, possibly photography or note-taking, etc.?



## ***Proactive Application of 5Ps and 5S through Form Follows Function***

The following slides serve as examples of how I proactively applied the 5Ps, 5S and Form Follows Function to my current choice of tool and wire bags that best suit my current needs, and how I organized the tools and supplies based on type, size, location, familiarity and ease of access. Since I spend most weekends at the nursery honing my skills, attending various workshops and “on the road” bonsai events, it’s important for me to have all my essentials organized in just two bags, allowing me to easily "grab and go" whenever needed.

Your needs and situations will most certainly differ than mine. Whatever your situation or circumstances, there is no argument that the right tool makes all the difference. This applies to having strong organizational tools as part of your toolbox.

It's important to note that this is my third tool bag and second wire bag in 2 years. My decision to upgrade bags wasn't made lightly. I didn't simply change for the sake of it, nor did I shy away from purchasing a new bag even though I had just bought one six months earlier and that bag was in perfect condition. As I gain more experience and improve my skills, my collection of tools , including a tool bag, need to proactively support my further growth.

This is also an example of applying *shitsuke* (躰) and *kaizen* (改善).



# Workstation

Preparing and supplying a workstation should not only promote a smooth workflow and pace with little distraction, but it should feel like home. Supported by the other four 5S principles setting the workstation is the embodiment of Form Follows Function.

The design should be adaptable, featuring movable components that cater to different tasks seamlessly. As one gains more experience, preparing a workstation will become more proactive and evolve to better meet their needs.

Be confident and experiment with different layouts and don't be afraid to try new things or reinvent tools. Pull from other experiences and activities. Learn from others' successes and failures. Trade ideas. But most of all, have a ton of fun.





# Example considerations when setting up a Workstation

## 1. Work Surface

- **Sturdy, water-resistant table:** A properly elevated, waterproof table is essential. Surface should be non-slip or have a textured mat to keep pots stable.
- **Rotating turntable:** For styling and pruning from all angles without moving the plant itself - very functional.

## 2. Height & Ergonomics

- Table or workstation height should allow for sitting and standing work — ideally adjustable or matched to a comfortable stool.
- Consider a footrest or fatigue floor mat for long standing sessions.

## 3. Optimize Layout for Efficiency

- Place most commonly used items within arm's reach.
- Arrange project at eye level and workstation/table at elbow level.
- Intelligently arrange workstation and work area, including floor space.

## 4. Soil & Repotting Zone

- A designated tray or basin embedded into or placed on the table for:
  - Mixing soil
  - Catching runoff
  - Separating used vs. new substrate
- Containers of mixed or separate soil components (akadama, pumice, lava rock, kanuma, etc.)

## 5. Adapt Over Time

- Design the workstation to evolve. A modular setup reflects the *form follows function* idea and adapts as function changes.



# Workstation - *Seiton* (整頓)

- Worktable
- b. Wire Stand / Tool Station  
(*tabletop / floor stand*)
- c. Wire Bucket
- d. Spray Bottle (*water*)
- e. Wipes
- f. Soil
- g. Work Tub
- h. Wedges (*Wood or Bean Bag*)
- i. Blower
- j. Towel
- k. Refuse Bucket
- l. Brush & Dustpan
- m. Ziplock Bags (*infected leaves*)





# Roller Wire Bag \*

*Separate Bag for Copper Wire*

- Aluminum Wire (1mm-4mm)
- Dividers
- Velcro Straps w/ Write-On Label
- Standard Pliers
- Small Needle Nose Pliers
- Copper Wire Snips
- Jin Pliers (2 sizes)
- Wire Cutters (Various types and sizes)
- Root Hook
- Oyster Knife
- 2 & 3 Prong Rakes
- Bonsai Broom & Brush
- Rafia
- Chopsticks & Bag
- Mesh & Rubber Tubing (not shown)



**\* The size and shape of the bag allows for rolls of larger gauge wire, rafia and chopstick bag to be placed on top of the sectioned wire.**





## A black plastic toolbox is shown open, revealing its interior. Inside, there is a clear plastic bag of rice, a stuffed animal, a blue bag, and various tools including a wrench and a screwdriver. The toolbox has a sturdy handle and a latch on the lid.





# Tools

## Pockets & Center Console\*



- Tool Pouch\*
- Gloves (Garden & Kevlar)\*
- Large Knob Cutters (2 sizes)
- Concave Cutters (flat)  
(various sizes)
- Concave Cutters (rounded)  
(various sizes)
- Trunk Splitter
- Root Cutter
- Various Shears & Scissors
- Leaf Cutters
- Jin Pick
- Tweezers (various types/sizes)



- Curved Blade Shears
- Utility Knife
- Apron\*
- Towels\*
- Utility Scissors
- Garden Shears
- Exacto Knife Set
- Diamond Plate Sharpener
- Honing Rods
- Saws\*
- Hammer\*
- Butane Torch\*
- Bonsai Brooms
- Tape Measure
- Collapsible Rake



# Carving Tools

## Center Console



- a. Brushes (*steel, brass & nylon*)
- b. Picks
- c. Grafting Knives (*various*)
- d. Jin Knives
- e. Carving Tools (*Drag & Push*)
- f. Carving Knives (*various*)
- g. Roll Bag





# Bonsai First Aid Kit

Center Consol



- a. Cut Paste(s)
- b. Cut Putty(s)
- c. Brushes
- d. Grafting Tape
- e. HVAC Tape
- f. Self-Fusing Tape
- g. Electrical Tape
- h. Ziplock Bags
- i. Clear Zippered Bag



# Tool Care

## Center Consol



- a. Isopropyl Alcohol
- b. Scouring Pads
- d. Cleaning Blocks
- e. Pipe Cleaners
- f. Toothbrush
- g. Tool Oil
- h. WD40
- i. Ziplock Bags
- j. Clear Zipper Bag





# Lime Sulfur Kit

## Center Consol



- a. Lime Sulfur
- b. Medicine Bottles
- c. Brushes
- d. Latex/Nitrile Gloves
- e. Facemasks
- f. Eye Protection (not shown)
- g. Ziplock Bags
- h. Clear Zipper Bag





# Personal First Aid Kit

Center Consol



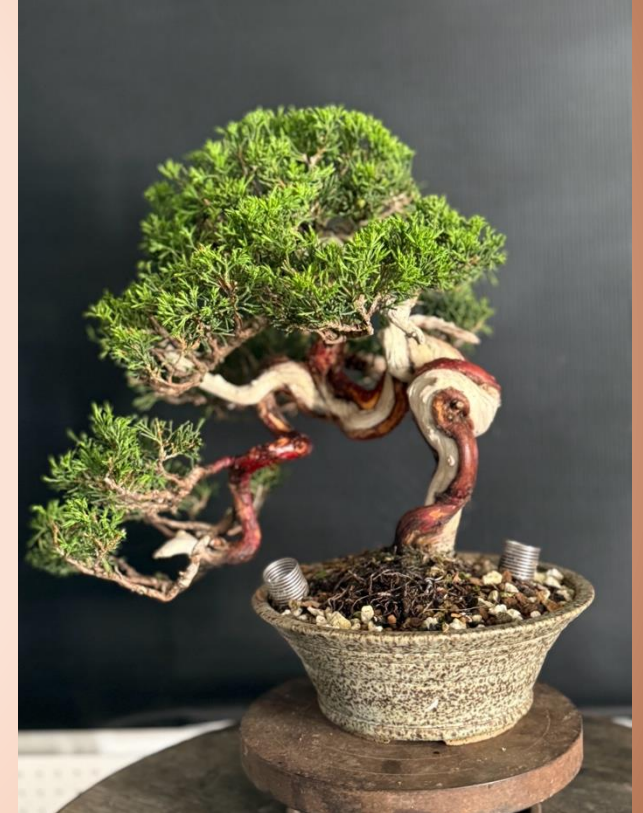
- a. Band-Aids (various sizes)
- b. Alcohol Wipes
- c. Hand Sanitizer
- c. Antiseptic Cream
- d. Gauze
- e. Cloth Tape
- f. Kling Wrap
- g. Tweezers
- h. Scissors
- i. Cold Pack
- J. Cotton Swabs
- k. Fingernail Clippers
- l. Kit Case



# ***In Bonsai and in life, organization isn't just about efficiency, it's an act of caring.***

To keep your bonsai thriving while minimizing stress, having a solid system in place is key.

- Good organization helps you take better care of your trees.
- Streamlining your workflow, like managing tools and workspace, using seasonal checklists, and keeping good records minimizes mistakes and boosts results.
- Observing data helps you maintain your trees' health and style over time.
- Learning and sharing experiences, whatever your level, boosts your confidence, speeds up your progress and hones your skills.



***Thank you! Let's continue to grow together.***

