Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs)

What are they?

A Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) is a set of detailed step-by-step instructions that describe how to carry out any given process. Teams can use them to manage their day-to-day activities, and they are particularly useful for documenting steps of processes that run more infrequently. e.g. a termly or annual cycle.

Standard Operating Procedures allow you to:

Benefits at a glance….

- the agreed best way of carrying out a task, created by those who have hands-on experience
- creates repeatable operations using step-by-step instructions that are easy to follow
- helps new starters quickly learn 'one best way' and everyone to get it right first time
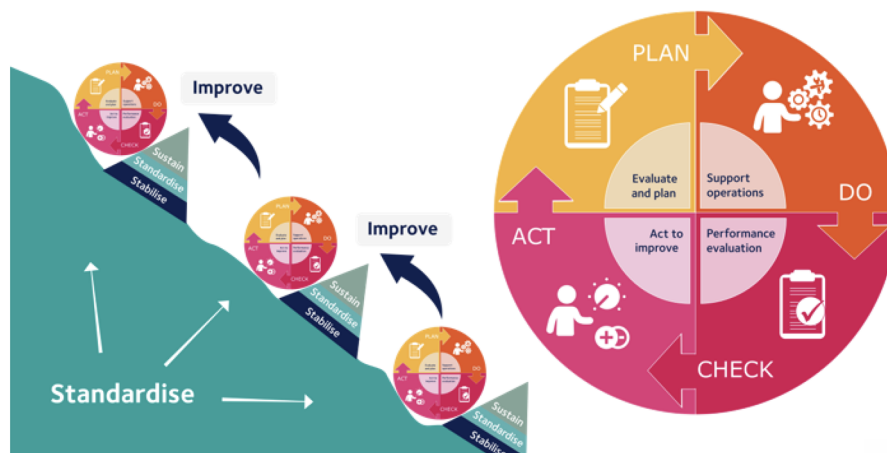- leads to consistent quality outcomes and results for all concerned

- **Achieve consistent results.** With everyone in the team working to the same documented process, you complete your tasks in the same way and achieve the right results every time.
- **Improve efficiency and reduce errors.** When everyone does the same task in different ways, it can affect quality and productivity.
- **Create a safe working environment.** SOPs are very useful when it comes to safety. You provide a standardized way of getting things done with minimized risk of safety hazards in the working environment.

Figure 1: Standard Work stops new implementations rolling back to the previous state

When to use it?

A **Standard** should only be developed for a process or task that is frequently repeatable, not for one-off tasks. It should contain the key steps that must be done correctly otherwise the process will fail.

Standards are local and the determine "how we do things around here". They might not transplant exactly to a very similar set of circumstances nearby, but can be a useful starter. For example, if, as the result of a *6S* workspace organisation activity, you create a **Standard Operating Procedure (SOP)** to maintain an organised, clean, high performance workspace it will be similar to those of other teams, but there is room for local personalisation too.

> **Case study:** Drawing up a **SOP** for carrying out a stock count in the Ashmolean shop has helped ensure that everyone involved is doing things the same way, and next time they do a stock count the guidance is already documented. Additionally other museums who use the same stock management system have been able to use the document for their own stock counts.

How to develop a SOP?

Construct your **Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs)** with those who have hands-on experience of the process or task.   Use the template in the toolkit as a starting point.

Ask those who are doing the same task to compare their methods. Are they following the same steps? Has someone made improvements that others could benefit from?

Work together to create the documented steps. A **SOP** answers the WHAT-type questions, for example, what happens? In what order? Who does what for whom?

'Work instructions' are HOW the individual carries out the procedures and it is important that colleagues are allowed some autonomy and flexibility in how they carry out these procedural steps. eg. how they might respond to an email.

Tip: Ensure robust version control in a central repository, for example, a team SharePoint site

---

When you have your **SOP** in place, use *Process Confirmation* to check that the process is implemented as documented and that when adjustments are needed a *Plan-Do-Check Adjust (PDCA) cycle* is scheduled.

Top tip: Have a regular schedule of reviewing each of your SOPs to ensure they remain up to date.