



Colors Part 2: Fresh Paint, Real Change: How Color, Cleanliness, and Order Drive Productivity and Safety

By Christian Rook

The balloon had long since disappeared, that white hot-air balloon with the green GreenPack panels, the one in *Wake-Up Call* 045 that had carried away the old identity. The logos were replaced, the ceremony forgotten. And yet something still lingered in the air: mistrust, unease, and a kind of collective insecurity.

As the new plant manager, I entered terrain that was *officially* long since “taken over,” but *unofficially* still lived in its own history.

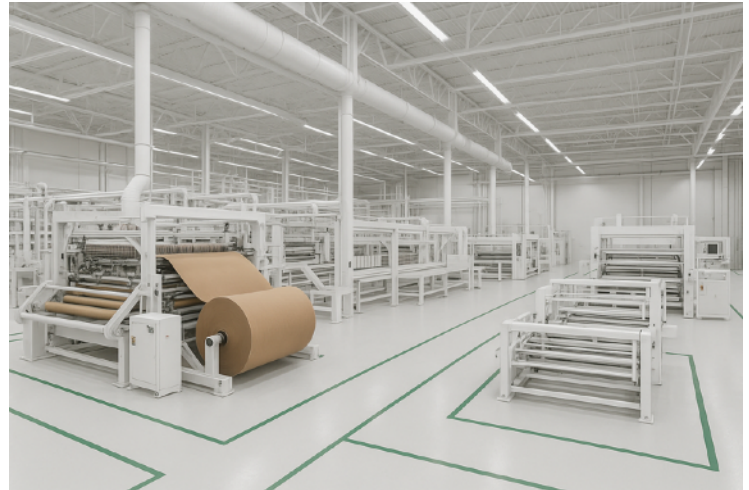
The reality was brutal: every month we hovered near the red, hoping for a break-even. Our OEE metrics were steadily falling, customers complained about quality, and workplace accidents were considered normal. Morale? It was rock bottom.

What surprised me: it wasn’t the strategy that mattered. Not the next PowerPoint, either. It was the color of the forklifts.

The Shock: “Everything Has to Be White”

The announcement arrived via email. Subject: “New Corporate Design Guidelines, Immediate Implementation.” I summoned the leadership team.

“Okay, everyone, listen up,” I said, clicking to the first slide. **“From today on, all equipment, machines and vehicles included, will be painted white.”**



Silence.

Then they exploded:

“White? Have you lost your mind?” Thomas H., the production manager, nearly leapt from his chair.

“This is complete nonsense! After one shift it’ll look like a pigsty!”

“Have they gone insane up in the ivory tower?” Rita S. from procurement shook her head.

“Do you know what that costs? White isn’t standard! The new inliners will be 15% more expensive!”

“Utter nonsense” Werner K., the shift supervisor, folded his arms. **“We have bigger problems than painting the factory. Line 3 has been down for weeks, customers are furious, and you want to talk about paint?”**

“What is this all about?” Maria W. from quality assurance looked stunned. **“We’re fighting for every penny, and now this?”**

Skepticism hung in the air like a storm cloud. And to be honest? I understood them.

The Wave of Resistance

In the following days, skepticism turned into open resistance. In the break room I overheard whispers:

"The new boss must be sniffing paint, himself ..."

"First they tear down everything that was 'GreenPack,' and now this..."

"As if white machines would fix our problems!"

The first cost estimate came from procurement: €280,000 for re-coating all equipment and vehicles. A punch to the gut, given our budget.

"We can't afford that!" Rita S. slammed the figures down on my desk. **"With that money, we could fix the broken die cutter or finally buy new safety gear!"**

She was right. And yet I felt, this was more than paint.



The Turning Point: A Machine... in GRAY

Three weeks later came the test. A new inline machine arrived, in standard factory gray. Our request for a white machine must have been missed in the procurement process, we later learned. A €200,000 investment, urgently needed for Line 2.

I stood with Thomas H. in front of it. Gray. Functional. Unremarkable.

"Perfect!" he said. **"Finally a sensible decision. It'll go right to work."**

I hesitated. Then I said, **"We can't set it up like this. We're sending it back."**

"WHAT?" Thomas H. stared at me like I'd lost my mind. **"You're serious? Over color? We need that machine NOW! Customers are waiting!"**

"I know," I said calmly. **"But it goes back, and comes back in white."**

"Have you gone totally mad?"

News of the outbound machine spread like wildfire.

The next morning Werner K. stood in my office. **"Christian, have you gone totally mad?"** **"We've got angry customers, quality's failing, safety's a joke, and you're making a scene over paint?"**

"Sit down first, Werner," I said. **"Tell me: how do you feel when you walk in here in the morning?"**

"How do I feel?" He looked at me as if I'd asked the color of the moon.

"Are you proud of what you see? Would you lead your family through this plant and say: 'This is where I work'?"

He was silent. Long moment.

"No," he finally admitted. **"But it's not because of the color of the factory or the machines."**

"Then what is it?"

"Everything is... shabby. Falling apart. No one cares. As long as it runs, it doesn't matter."

"Exactly," I said. **"And that's where it starts."**

Werner thought for a moment. Then nodded: **"The machine's still in the yard. Won't ship until tomorrow, dispatch window. I might have an idea. I've got a line technician who's trained as a painter. He could paint the machine white in two days. Mean-**

while we'd get it operational and lose no extra time."

It was a great idea. That's what we did. And the...

The First White Forklift: "It Won't Last a Week"

Four weeks later the first freshly painted forklift rolled out of the garage. Blazing white. The staff surrounded it like museum guests.

"Just great," said Klaus S. from logistics dryly. **"It won't last a week."**

"Two days, tops," chimed in Michael M.

"Who'll drive it?" asked Anna B. from the warehouse. **"I don't dare. What if it gets scratched..."**

"That Was Me!": The Day Stefan J. Felt Proud

A few days later. I walked through the hall and heard voices from Line 2.

"Look, boss!" called Stefan J., a machine operator. **"Did you see? That new machine has been running for four hours straight without a hitch!"**

I looked. The white inline machine gleamed. No oil stains, no paper scraps, no glue marks.

"How'd you manage that?"

Stefan grinned. **"Well, you notice right away when something's off. With the gray box before... everything was always dirty. You didn't see anything."**

He pointed to a tiny spot on the side. **"That? That was this morning. A small droplet of oil. Before I'd have thought, 'Eh, whatever,' and tossed a cardboard sheet underneath and moved on. But today I thought, 'That bothers me!' So I cleaned it, and then immediately looked for the source. Just a loose screw. Took five minutes. But without that spot, I wouldn't have seen it."**

"And why are you telling me this?"

Stefan went red. **"Honestly? I'm... proud of it. Before I used to think, 'Well, it runs.' Now I think, 'That's my machine.'"**

It clicked. 5S, Sort, Set in Order, Shine, Standardize, Sustain. What we'd felt intuitively had a name. Born in Japan (Toyota Production System), now a global standard. But often misinterpreted as a "cleaning rule." In truth it's a cultural system. A silent language of leadership.

Cleanliness became pride.

The Miracle of Visibility

"Boss, you've got to see this!" Maria burst into my office. It was Friday; the white forklift had been in use for three days.

We went into the hall. Everything *around* the forklift was... clean. Not just clean, cared for. Someone had wiped away the oil stain that had been there for months. The pallets were neatly stacked. Even the trash was gone.

"That wasn't me," said Thomas H. sheepishly.

"The guys just did it themselves."

"Why?" I asked.

"No idea. It just looked awful, all dirty around it."

There it was. The first sign.

"And you know what?" Thomas H. grinned. **"The scratch on the side? Stefan J. logged it immediately. Normally he'd say, 'It was already there.' But now... I don't know. You can see it."**

The Science Behind Visual Order

Research shows: when our eyes perceive color, they send signals to the hypothalamus, a brain region regulating hormones and emotional responses. Visual order creates feelings of control, predictability, and safety.

In chaotic environments, people think, **"Nobody cares about the details here."** In clean environments, they think, **"They're watching**

closely.” That attitude transfers, to behavior, quality, and safety.

Kaizen Institute Europe (2021) found that error detection rates on “white” equipment increase by over 40%, exactly what Stefan J. experienced with that droplet of oil.

“They’re Crazy!”: Procurement Takes a Stand

Six weeks later, we faced another test. A new die cutter was due to arrive, in white. The premium? €12,000.

Rita S., the buyer, stormed into my office like a hurricane.

“This is insane! €12,000! For color! Do you know what we could do with that? Buy spare parts! Renovate the cafeteria! Replace all the safety shoes!”

She was right. €12,000 was a lot for a factory fighting for every cent.

“Rita,” I said calmly, **“what were last month’s accident stats?”**

“What does that have to do with this?”

“What were they?”

She sighed. **“Three accidents. One forklift collision, one fall, one caught finger.”**

“And what’s happened since the white forklift arrived?”

She hesitated. **“One accident. But that was probably just a fluke!”**

“Was it?”

She went silent.

“Rita, how much does one workplace accident cost us? On average?”

“With downtime, insurance, training ... about €8,000.”

“What if we just had two fewer accidents per year?”

She did the math. I saw it in her eyes: that €12,000 was already paid.

“It... it can’t just be the paint job.”

“No,” I said. **“But that’s where it begins.”**

When Color Creates Responsibility: The Forklift Paradigm

A forklift is a tool, but also a mirror. It reveals how an organization is truly led, and how employees understand responsibility.

Fearsome statistics: OSHA estimates between 35,000 and 62,000 forklift-related accidents occur annually in the U.S., roughly 11% of forklifts are involved in an accident each year.

Everyday experience shows it: a forklift used long-term, riddled with dents and scratches. No one remembers when each happened. During shift handovers it’s always, **“It was already like that when I got it.”** That’s where erosion begins, not just of the machine’s appearance, but of mindset.

When damage isn’t visible, or not addressed, the machine loses its value, and responsibility vanishes.

But with a freshly painted, white forklift, clean, cared for, any new scratch stands out. And so does the person driving it. If shift handover protocols include two signatures, giver and receiver, verifying that the equipment is in perfect condition, then something changes.

Now drivers think twice before barreling through a tight corner. They maintain safer distances. Double-check mirrors. Not because someone’s watching them, but because the environment radiates value, and they feel accountable.

The Life-Saving Dimension of Visual Order

A carelessly driven forklift doesn’t randomly scratch, it hits walls, racks, or people. And that transforms an aesthetic concern into a vital safety issue.

A standard warehouse forklift weighs between 1.5 and 4.5 tons, heavier than most cars. The frightening truth: a forklift traveling at 5 km/h or 25 km/h *doesn't matter*, the vehicle's momentum alone is enough to crush a human body. No reaction time, no heroics help. Carefulness isn't optional, it's mandatory.

The numbers speak for themselves: one in six workplace fatalities involves a forklift. Even more shocking: 70% of forklift accidents are *preventable* with standard safety measures in place.

The Moment of Truth: "Why Not?"

A few weeks later. I sat with Rita S., Thomas H., and Werner K. in the cafeteria. The last quarter's numbers sat on the table. We were in the black, for the first time in years.

"Okay," said Rita S., pushing her glasses up.

"I admit it. Accidents are down 60%. Quality complaints down 40%. OEE rose from 65% to 78%."

"That can't just be the color," Thomas H. still shook his head.

"No," I said. **"But that's where it started."**

Werner K., the skeptic from day one, leaned back.

"You know what? At first I thought you and HQ were insane. But now... when I come in and see the clean, white machines, I think, 'Someone here pays attention. This is the right place.'"

"And the color of the new machine?" I asked.

All three glanced at each other. Then Rita S. said,

"White, of course. Why not?"

That was the moment I knew: we'd made it.

Color as a Mirror of Culture

The new die cutter arrived, in white, with no surcharge.

"You know what?" said Thomas H. as we inspected it. **"It fits. It belongs here."**

That was the turning point. Because it was no longer about the *outside*, it was about the *inside*. The employees didn't have to say it, they showed it. They felt taken seriously. The culture had found a new visual voice, and with it, a new sense of belonging.

The Psychology of Color at Work

Color psychology isn't New Age, it's evidence-based science. Color can enhance memory, boost engagement, and channel attention.

Color works through cognitive consistency: humans seek consistency in beliefs and attitudes across situations.

White, the color we chose, was no accident. In many cultures, color has historically been used to evoke specific moods and behaviors. White symbolizes purity, a fresh start, and above all: visibility.

White reflects all colors equally, representing both positive and negative aspects. It makes everything visible.

Safety Through Visibility

We also repainted the floor lines in vivid green, the international signal for safe routes. The impact was immediate: forklifts stuck to lanes. Pedestrian walkways were respected. Near-misses dropped. Because orientation was visually anchored.

The Measurable Payoffs of Visual Order

The investment paid off. Studies confirm the impressive results of 5S implementations:

- A typical 5S rollout dramatically reduces space needs in existing processes
- A 2015 MIT study showed companies with visual standards reduce downtime and repair

costs by 10-30%, primarily through early problem detection

- Another key link: visual order doesn't just reduce risk, it measurably boosts efficiency and profitability. Companies adopting visual standards systematically see 10-30% higher productivity, thanks to less searching, lower repair costs, fewer stoppages, fewer accidents, faster onboarding

The Power of First Impressions

We underestimated its effect on visitors. Customers, suppliers, and potential recruits, all walked into a plant that looked, smelled, and *felt* different. 5S is the foundation of any first impression.

Now, the first thing they think isn't "They work hard here", it's "They work *with* care." That difference shows up in contracts, partnerships, and reputation.

Final Thought: Color Is Not Just Cosmetics

So when someone asks why we painted machines white and had forklifts repainted, I say: because we wanted to lead people, not just manage processes.

Investing in cleanliness, order, and color is investing in culture. And in productivity, safety, and pride.

The 5S methodology is a lean management tool designed to help organizations maintain clean, organized, and efficient workplaces. But it's more than that, it's a statement.

Whoever cares for their equipment like a freshly painted ship works differently in it.

Whoever treats the floor like an operating room thinks more precisely.

And whoever uses color intentionally can even in the loudest factory send a silent message: **You are welcome here. You are part of something meaningful.**

The Silent Revolution

Color *leads*, and color *protects*. Anyone who sees color and upkeep as mere decoration profoundly underestimates its power. Color:

- creates visibility
- fosters accountability
- signals value
- reduces accidents
- increases efficiency
- and ultimately strengthens the bottom line

The white-painted forklift is not an aesthetic ideal. It is a leadership decision. And a test: how does *your team* handle responsibility when it's made visible?



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