How to Use Kanban with your Teams / Continuous Improvement

What is a Kanban board?

- Kanban is the Japanese word for "visual signal" and is an agile project management tool designed to help visualize work, limit work-in-progress (WIP), and maximize efficiency.
- The board is usually broken up into three parts: "To Do," "In-progress," and "Done," and uses cards or sticky notes, columns (sometimes swim lanes), and continuous improvement to help individuals/teams commit to the right amount of work, and get it done!
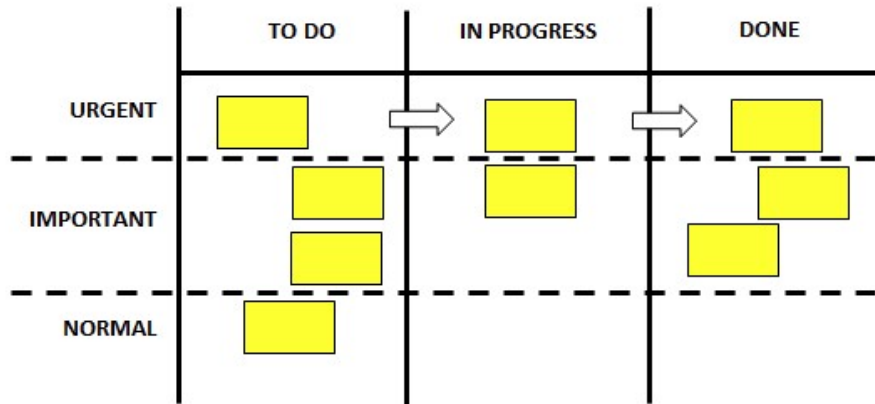
Why use a Kanban board?

- Having all the tasks on the same board or screen helps teams lay out an efficient plan and achieve results
- It increases collaboration and highlights the tasks on which the team has agreed to focus
- Visualization of the work process on a board leads to greater transparency in the distribution of work, and clearly shows any potential roadblocks
- By measuring the flow of the work on the Kanban board, teams can calculate their speed of delivery, which in turn can lead to an increase in productivity and quality.

How to use/encourage your team members to use a Kanban board?

- Have your team/individual team members think about what they are doing now and have them visualize the workflow/the current process. Encourage them to use three columns: To do – In Progress – Done.
- Help them to avoid the classic productivity mistake of turning a project into a task. It takes a series of tasks (or cards) to accomplish a project. This includes deciding on size and scope for a card ensuring that "meaty" or challenging cards are broken into multiple cards.
- Pro tip: people often find it hard to estimate time a task takes to finish. Instead, it might be more beneficial to assign complexity or effort required (low, medium, or high).
- Avoid making changes to the process immediately after documenting the process. Changes should not be rushed.
- Add additional columns to your board if needed. For example, use "Waiting for" or "Parking lot" columns to capture tasks that cannot be worked on until an answer is received and/or a decision is made; this can help team members visualize the workflow.
- Encourage them to use the Kanban board as they are doing their work; physically moving the cards through the columns will motivate them to review their list and to reprioritize as needed with complexity and effort in mind.
- Use the Kanban board in your 1:1 meetings with your team members, as well as in team meetings.
- Help them manage and improve workflow by discussing their own observations of their work, or by observing their work. You may need to help them identify and resolve bottlenecks.
- Have feedback loops. Encourage cross-functional collaborations and experiments to push for improvement.
- Encourage leadership from everyone to help keep the mandate of continuous change for maximizing improvements.

Elements of a Kanban board:

Kanban example with swimlanes (source: https://www.webtcards.com/blog/organize-your-tasks-using-kanban-boards/)

- **Cards/visual signals:** One of the first things you will notice about a Kanban board is the visual cards (sticky notes or taped cards). On the front of physical card/when using a software tool, capture the following info in fields that give you the ability for a quick overview on work items:
  - Title
  - Description
  - Owner or assigned team member
  - Cycle time
  - Priority
  - Subtasks

Consider using the back of a physical card, or the remaining fields and features within your digital Kanban, to record additional items:
  - Valuable metrics
  - Comments
  - Historical data

- **Columns:** Each column represents a specific activity that together compose a "workflow" and each card flows through the columns until completion. Workflows can be as easy as "To do – In Progress – Done".
- **Kanban Swimlanes (Optional):** Horizontal lanes on Kanban boards can also be helpful. They are called swimlanes, and help to separate different teams, priorities, services, activities, etc.

Resources:

- https://www.atlassian.com/agile/kanban/boards
- https://craft.io/blog/using-kanban-board.html
- https://www.projectmanager.com/kanban
- https://www.forbes.com/sites/bryancollinseurope/2018/07/19/how-to-use-kanban-to-become-insanely-productive-a-short-guide/#66eeb6de3c16