Kanban Board for Teams

In Japanese, the word kanban means a signboard or a sign. Toyota used signal cards of this name in its factories to signal when more parts were needed, so that work was pulled in only when there was room for it. David Anderson adapted this idea for knowledge work and described the Kanban Method in his 2010 book. Its central tool is the kanban board: columns such as To Do, Doing and Done, with one card for each piece of work. Here we look at four of its core practices: visualise the work, limit work in progress, manage the flow and make policies explicit.

1. Visualise the Work

Much of our work is invisible: it lives in emails, in people's heads and in long to-do lists. The first practice puts every piece of work on the board, one card per task, in the column that shows its current state. The key question is: can everyone see all the work and where it stands? A shared picture makes problems visible early, such as a card that has not moved for days. It also replaces many status meetings, because the board already answers the question of who is doing what.

Example: A family visualises the work at home: every job goes on a card on the fridge, under to do, doing or done. Now everyone can see that the tap repair has waited for three weeks, and it finally gets done.

At work: Hanan, a team leader in a marketing team, hears that everyone is busy but nothing gets finished. She starts by visualising the work: every task goes on the team board, one card each. The board shows twenty-three cards in Doing for only five people.

2. Limit Work in Progress

Work in progress, or WIP, is everything that has been started but not finished. The second practice sets a WIP limit: the maximum number of cards allowed in a column, or for one person, at the same time. When a column is full, nobody starts something new; instead, the team helps to finish what is already there. The rule is simple: stop starting, start finishing. Fewer tasks at once means less switching between tasks, more focus and faster results.

Example: A cook limits work in progress to two pans at a time, because a third pan would burn. Each dish gets full attention, and dinner is ready sooner.

At work: Hanan and the team agree on a WIP limit of three cards in Doing. When the column is full, a designer who is free helps a colleague finish a brochure instead of starting a new task. Within a few weeks, the team finishes more work every week.

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3. Manage the Flow

The third practice looks at how smoothly cards move across the board, from start to finish. Instead of keeping people busy, the team watches the work itself: where does it wait, and where does it get stuck? A column where cards pile up shows a bottleneck that slows everyone down. Kanban is a pull system: a card moves to the next column only when there is room for it there. Measuring how long a card takes from start to finish helps the team make promises that others can rely on.

Example: In a coffee shop, the team manages the flow and sees that orders pile up at the till while the coffee machine stands idle. At busy times, a second person helps at the till, and the queue moves faster.

At work: Hanan manages the flow and sees that cards pile up in the column Waiting for Approval. The manager agrees to review designs every morning instead of once a week. Cards now cross the board in days instead of weeks.

4. Make Policies Explicit

Every team has rules about how work is done, but many of them exist only in people's heads. The fourth practice writes these rules down and shows them on the board. For example, a policy can define when a card is ready to start and when it really counts as done. Clear policies stop arguments, help new team members and let people decide by themselves. Policies are not fixed forever: the team improves them as it learns.

Example: Friends in a shared flat make their policies explicit with a short note on the fridge: whoever finishes the milk buys the next bottle. The daily arguments stop.

At work: Hanan's team makes its policies explicit with a short definition of done above the last column. A brochure counts as done only when the client has approved it and the file is saved in the shared folder. Cards no longer come back, and the team trusts the board.

Conclusion

In summary, a kanban board helps teams see and improve their work through four core practices: visualise the work, limit work in progress, manage the flow and make policies explicit. The Kanban Method adds regular feedback meetings and small, steady improvements. It starts with what the team does now and changes it step by step. Kanban does not need new job titles or a big launch, only a board, clear limits and the habit of looking at the work together. When a team stops starting and starts finishing, the work flows.

Sources

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