Kaizen

Gaining the Full Benefits of Continuous Improvement

How does "change" happen in your organization? Is it through major initiatives, or is it part of the ongoing way you work?

Some types of change inevitably need a major project; meaning months of hard work, big budgets and upheaval.

But, often undervalued, an alternative or complementary approach to improving systems, processes and so on, is through more subtle, ongoing changes and continuous improvements.

Once a new major change has happened, perhaps a new system or structure put in place, is everything perfect? Will the new processes stay set in stone until the next major change in a few years' time? Almost certainly not. In fact, if this attitude were taken, you would probably see a gradual decline in benefits after the initial step improvement, as inefficiencies and bad practice crept in.

There is always room to make small improvements, challenge the status quo, and tune processes and practice on an everyday basis. In fact, you and your colleagues probably do this week in, week out without calling it "change" or even "continuous improvement". You’re already getting real benefits from the intuitive approach to continuous improvement. And over time, all of these incremental changes add up, and make a significant positive impact on your team and organization.

One approach to continuous, incremental improvement is called kaizen. It originated in Japan and the word translates to mean change (kai) for the good (zen).

Kaizen is based on the philosophical belief that everything can be improved: Some organizations look at a process and see that it’s running fine; Organizations that follow the principle of Kaizen see a process that can be improved. This means that nothing is ever seen as a status quo – there are continuous efforts to improve which result in small, often imperceptible, changes over time. These incremental changes add up to substantial changes over the longer term, without having to go through any radical innovation. It can be a much gentler and employee-friendly way to institute the changes that must occur as a business grows and adapts to its changing environment.
Understanding the Approach

Because Kaizen is more a philosophy than a specific tool, its approach is found in many different process improvement methods ranging from Total Quality Management (TQM), to the use of employee suggestion boxes. Under kaizen, all employees are responsible for identifying the gaps and inefficiencies and everyone, at every level in the organization, suggests where improvement can take place.

Kaizen aims for improvements in productivity, effectiveness, safety, and waste reduction, and those who follow the approach often find a whole lot more in return:

- **Less waste** – inventory is used more efficiently as are employee skills.
- **People are more satisfied** – they have a direct impact on the way things are done.
- **Improved commitment** – team members have more of a stake in their job and are more inclined to commit to doing a good job.
- **Improved retention** – satisfied and engaged people are more likely to stay.
- **Improved competitiveness** – increases in efficiency tend to contribute to lower costs and higher quality products.
- **Improved consumer satisfaction** – coming from higher quality products with fewer faults.
- **Improved problem solving** – looking at processes from a solutions perspective allows employees to solve problems continuously.
- **Improved teams** – working together to solve problems helps build and strengthen existing teams.

Another Japanese term associated with kaizen is **muda**, which means waste. Kaizen is aimed at decreasing waste through eliminating overproduction, improving quality, being more efficient, having less idle time, and reducing unnecessary activities. All these translate to money savings and turn potential losses into profits.

The kaizen philosophy was developed to improve manufacturing processes, and it is one of the elements which led to the success of Japanese manufacturing through high quality and low costs. However, you can gain the benefits of the kaizen approach in many other working environments too, and at both a personal level or for your whole team or organization.

Much of the focus in kaizen is on reducing "waste" and this waste takes several forms:

- **Movement** – moving materials around before further value can be added to them
- **Time** – spent waiting (no value is being added during this time)
- **Defects** – which require re-work or have to be thrown away
- **Over-processing** – doing more to the product than is necessary to give the "customer" maximum value for money
• **Variations** – producing bespoke solutions where a standard one will work just as well.

The table below shows some examples of these forms of waste in an office environment.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Form of Waste</th>
<th>Examples</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Movement</strong></td>
<td>People moving between buildings for meetings when a teleconference could add the same value.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• &quot;Mental&quot; movement can be a type of waste too, where people are distracted into switching from one job to another, before the first job is complete. Try to concentrate on one type of task for a block of time such as planning, thinking work, e-mail and phone calls. Use an Activity Log or an Interrupter's Log to identify how often you are currently switching between types of work.</td>
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<td>• Having to open a file or database to look for key phone numbers you use day in day out when it might be quicker to print these out and pin them on the wall.</td>
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<td><strong>Time</strong></td>
<td>Waiting for latecomers in meetings – always start meetings on time out of courtesy to those who are prompt, and to encourage good time keeping.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Searching for documents in your e-mail or file system because you have not created a set of folders that enables you to find things quickly. In manufacturing workshops, kaizen led to boards for hanging tools on that had outlines of the tool around each hook, making it really quick to identify where to put a tool when you have finished with it.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Defects</strong></td>
<td>A manager re-writing a report because he or she had not briefed or trained a junior member of staff fully on how to prepare it.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Re-doing or discarding work because you’d done it without adequate research or before key decisions had been made that affected the basis of your work.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Over-processing</strong></td>
<td>Spending time adding color to a document or report if it is going to be printed in black and white for distribution at a meeting.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Reading material in more detail than is necessary. See our article on Reading Strategies for more on this.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Inviting more people to meetings than is necessary. Limit meetings to those who should be involved in making decisions. Others can be informed about what was decided by sending them the meeting notes afterwards.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Variations</strong></td>
<td>Producing a report specially for one group when a report you prepare regularly for another audience would serve their needs if another field was added.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Creating new documents when you could set up and use a standard template.</td>
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**Using Kaizen**

Here's our suggested approach for using kaizen thinking on your own, or with your team:

1. Keep a ideas log of things that seem inefficient or that you’d like to improve. It's often easier to spot these in the heat of the moment than in cold reflection.

2. Once a month, spend some time identifying areas where there is "waste" in the way you or your team is working. Use your ideas log as input, but also think about the wider picture and your overall ways of working. Go through each of the types of waste listed above as a checklist. How could "waste" be eliminated? How could things be improved?

3. Plan out **when** you're going to make these changes. You need to strike a balance between getting on with making the improvements immediately (so
that the area of waste doesn't become a bigger problem), and avoiding "change overload".

It is especially important to take into account the impact or confusion that it could cause for other, which in turn, could cause them to avoid adopting the change. And a great way to assess the impact of changes you are considering is to use the Impact Analysis Tool.

4. If the changes affect others, be sure to consult them about the new arrangements, and listen to their comments!

Kaizen is something that you can benefit from quickly as an individual but, embracing the ideas and approach with your team will take a concerted effort. Here are some suggestions to help make kaizen work with your team:

- Learn, with your team, more about the philosophy of kaizen – this will help you embrace the ideas and develop a participative, team-based approach
- Develop a suggestion process – how will the ideas be gathered and evaluated?
- Establish your overall kaizen approach and controls – rather than have people implement changes at will, have a clear system to follow
- Reward ideas – the more ideas, the more kaizen is at work in the day-to-day attitudes of employees

**Key Points**

Kaizen is a philosophy that supports continuous, incremental process changes that sustain a high level of efficiency. A one level kaizen can help you personally improve the way you work by eliminating "waste". At the organizational level, kaizen can be a powerful team-approach that harnesses suggestions and involvement from people at every level. Wide participation can serve to improve moral and satisfaction as much as it improves production, costs, and other hard measures. If you choose to bring kaizen into your workplace, you'll be surprised at how big an impact small changes can make, and how the culture of continuous improvement can thrive.

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