

# Kaizen: Continuous Improvement

The word Kaizen means continuous improvement. It comes from the Japanese words 改 ("kai") which means "change" or "to correct" and 善 ("zen") which means "good".

*“The journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step.”* Lao-tzu

Small improvements will yield large results. This was the basic philosophy of W. Edwards Deming when he took his knowledge to Japan following World War II. After successfully using Kaizen principles to modernize the U.S. Census Bureau, Deming worked with the U.S. Military to improve the processes that were used to build and maintain military equipment during the war.

There are six ways to use Kaizen:

1. Asking small questions
2. Thinking small thoughts
3. Taking small actions
4. Solving small problems
5. Bestowing small rewards
6. Identifying small moments

When Deming and other American quality gurus first started working with Toyota, Honda and Fuji, they called their approach TWI: Training Within Industries.

During this time, Dr. Deming developed his 14 Points of Management. One of those points, which was highly emphasized, was to **Eliminate Fear in the Workplace**. He believed that fear stifled creativity and productivity; therefore, huge goals that seem unattainable shut down the brain more than they motivate it.

Research now supports that belief, based on the finding of how the Amygdala (the “fight or flight” mechanism located in the mid-brain) works. Anxiety stops people from reaching their goals. Destructive emotions like fear and anxiety paralyze the cortex, which is the thinking area of the brain and center of creativity.

If one begins by taking tiny steps (Kaizen), panic and anxiety can be minimized. Therefore, rather than asking the workers, “How are you going to make Toyota number one in the world?” he asked them to think, **“What one small, trivial step could I take that in the long run may improve the process or product?”** His rationale was that a question so small would not trigger fear in the Amygdala, which would allow the workers’ creativity to make helpful suggestions to improve the processes.

Processes cannot just be copied or replicated. Each business, school, or organization must examine and improve their own processes. Additionally, without a clear “Aim of the System”, and collection of knowledge, process change will not necessarily create the desired results. Dr. Deming was quoted as saying, “*I think that people here expect miracles. American management thinks that they can just copy from Japan—but they don't know what to copy!*”<sup>1</sup>

One Kaizen strategy is to bestow small rewards for suggestions on how to improve processes or procedures. In Toyota plants in Japan and the U.S., this was implemented by paying workers a small amount (around \$3.50) for every improvement suggestion that they offered, whether or not the suggestion was implemented. In America, the strategy has been to award larger payments (\$400 - \$1000) for suggestions, but only if the suggestion is implemented. Over the years the Japanese Kaizen continuous improvement process yields more than 200 suggestions per worker in one year, compared to 4 suggestions per worker in U.S. Auto worker in two years. Which method is more likely to find a successful improvement?

What does Kaizen mean for your life? Here are some questions that you may find useful.

1. If I were guaranteed not to fail, what would I do?
2. What is one small step I can take to reduce any fears that I have?
3. What one small, trivial step could I take that in the long run may improve the process or product?
4. What small step could I take today that may change the quality of my life?
5. If health were my #1 priority, what one thing could I do today to be healthier?
6. What is the smallest step I can take to be more efficient?

Remember, as Deming said, “Learning is not compulsory... neither is survival.” And, “Change is not mandatory...neither is survival.”

Bob Hoglund

References:

Maurer, R (2004). *One Small Step Can Change Your Life: The Kaizen Way*. New York: Workman Publishing Company, Inc.

*If Japan Can..Why Can't We* (white paper), broadcast by NBC in 1980.