



What is Kaizen?

We will now tackle the question “what is Kaizen?” on this page. Let’s start by giving you a definition that reflects how Toyota defines it.

Kaizen refers to a series of activities through which waste sources are eliminated one at a time, for minimal cost, by workers pooling their wisdom and understanding of the work, thus increasing efficiency in an effective timely manner.

Additionally Toyota would consider that Kaizen needs to be performed by all employees at every location, and never by specialist alone.

Therefore in its beginning and in some organizations Kaizen has a very narrow and specific method and definition, however like many words its meaning has been broaden overtime. Let us now provide the boarder definition we often see used today.

Kaizen is any activity or action that leads to improvement, via incremental steps that build upon previous gains.

Under this second definition we would include a much wider range of activities and actions under the name Kaizen. Firstly the second definition allows not only on eliminating waste as part of Kaizen, but my also include actions or activities undertaken to increase the value being produced. Just as in the narrower definition improvement activities undertaken by teams of workers are still part of Kaizen. Under this definition there are some other activities that would now also be considered kaizen. The planned events commonly referred to as kaizen events would also be kaizen, even though they are often lead by specialists, with only minor worker involvement. Also under this definition you would include employee suggestion programs as part of Kaizen. Basically under this second definition any action or activity undertaken to create improvement and eliminate waste would be a part of Kaizen.

Under this boarder definition let us also discuss the three main ways in which we see the kaizen idea being used, and why in some circumstances each of them can be beneficial.

Worker Team Kaizen

Under the stricter definition of Toyota, groups of workers are organized into teams with a leader. Each of these teams is expected to undertake kaizen activities on a regular basis’s to generate improvements relating to how better improve the way in which they perform their jobs. If required these teams can and do draw on support from the engineering staff. T he reason for empowering the worker to improve their jobs is twofold; no one understands what is causing them problems in performing their jobs better than the workers actually doing the job, and additionally it ensures that changes that are detrimental to the workers are not instituted.

Let us further discuss the second benefit. Good organizations realize that excess worker fatigue leads to an increase in both human errors, and accidents. Since human error leads to lower quality, increased re-



work, and increased scrap, we need to prevent it from occurring. At the same time accidents cause numerous problems as well like, increased compensation insurance costs, lost production, lower production due to missing worker or less experienced replacements, and often poor quality due to replacements. Undertaking work improvements that reduce worker effort required to obtain the same or greater production, results in lower costs and less waste.

This type of Kaizen is generally best when labour is critical to the process operating like assembly lines.

The Kaizen Event

Kaizen events come into value as a process becomes less worker dependent and more machine dependent, in fact in highly automated processes, workers can help make suggestions, but it often takes highly skilled specialist that understand the machine and its control systems to effect any real change. Because implementing such changes takes time and effort. For organizations that are actually dependent upon automated processes, the only realistic way to implement Kaizen is through focussed and scheduled events.

In the grey area between worker dependence and automation dependence, it is often beneficial to use both types of kaizen activities.

Suggestion Kaizen

Suggestion Kaizen is the least action oriented, and I would question it being actually Kaizen until a suggestion is implemented. That being said it can be a very useful tool in supporting both steady Kaizen team work and Kaizen Events, as they ideas can be used to help drive these types of Kaizen, and help provide them a focus.

The only warning about this type of kaizen is that suggestion whether implemented or not need to be dealt with quickly, and those that are rejected require an explanation of why they were rejected. By explaining the reasons behind rejection you build mutual respect with your people and you help them understand the limitations under which the managers operate. As understanding and respect grow you will be reward with better suggestions in the future, and more frequent suggestions (people see that you care and want their ideas). When implementing a suggestion always, give credit to the person that made the suggestion it is a sign of respect and appreciation, both of which build your organizations morale.

We hope this has answered your question, and for more on Kaizen [click here](#), or to get training materials on Kaizen [click here](#).