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### **Kaizen for You**

“You see but you do not observe, Watson.” Sherlock Holmes favorite quip to drive home a point may not exactly be Gaelic to most fans of Arthur Conan Doyle. While Holmes’ hoped this would awake the somnolent espionage skills in Watson, Doyle’s protagonist could well have been the inspiration for many Japanese Kaizen gurus.

Masaaki Imai, the noted Kaizen guru, an advocate of the above aphorism when in India for the 8th time, related an anecdote to make his point about the management’s apathy to production related issues.

A French automaker had invited Imai and his team to study the productivity at one of their plants. On going down to the shop floor they found the assembly line was 1500 meters long. It is roughly fifteen times the size of assembly lines in Japanese auto companies. The longer the assembly line the greater will be the number of people, which consequently means more mistakes too.

Imai recommend that managers need to go down to the Gemba (Japanese for shop floor) more often to observe the nitty-gritty of the production processes. Hands-on experience is what triggers off the grey cells he says. “The key is to be inquisitive. If I, as a manager, notice a leak in one of the machines I must be able to track down the problem. I must know that the leak is because of a gap, which has been caused by the vibrating action of the machine. And that the vibration has caused two specific screws to loosen and cause the gap.” After putting forth the case, he continues, “The solution could be in tightening those two screws every morning before the machine is started, thus avoiding the possibility of a leak.” Sounds simple. Well, because it is. That is Gemba Kaizen.

#### **Welcome to the shop floor**

So, is Gemba Kaizen just another fancy sounding expensive cost-saving exercise? “Kaizen means continuous improvement involving everybody without spending much money. It’s certainly not an expensive technique, but a method to reduce costs. It aims to involve people and tries to make the best use of people’s efforts and know-how,” he concludes.

The history of Kaizen dates back to the 1950s when Toyota decided to implement it by introducing quality checks within the process itself. It means that quality was inspected at every stage of the production process instead of checking the finished product for defects. Taiichi Ohno was the first Japanese to have come up with this concept.

However, it was only in the 1970s that westerners became curious about this Japanese best practice. Srinivas Gondhalekar, operational consultant and president, Kaizen Institute, stated, “There was an international oil crisis in 1973 when the OPEC (Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries) decided to hike oil prices considerably. With petrol prices up, most American families felt the need for small fuel-efficient cars. However, American auto companies, with huge unalterable plant set-ups, were in no way

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geared to meet the changing needs. That's when Toyota and other Japanese carmakers drove in. They were able to adapt their existing plants to meet the demand for smaller, fuel efficient cars. Imai's book 'Kaizen-The key to Japanese Competitive Success' unraveled these facts to the Americans. Soon top-notch American and European companies like Ford, AT&T, Siemens, Phillips and General Motors began to follow his advice on the process of continuous learning not only in manufacturing but also in other functional areas. In India he has advised a number of companies including Castrol, HLL, Jollyboard and more recently Milton Plastics and The Taj Group of Hotels.

Yogesh Waghani's company Milton Plastics went through a Gemba Kaizen exercise under the scrutiny of Imai in 1998; Waghani touts involvement of top management in such an exercise as top priority. "If we guys at the top are not convinced about the effectiveness of a measure, we would not encourage the change whole heartedly. Gemba Kaizen insists on involvement of the top management," says Waghani, Director, Milton Plastics.

Once Milton Plastics decided to take the initiative to implement Gemba Kaizen, Waghani started spending at least an hour on the shop floor. Waghani claims that the exercise interested him so much that the one-hour visit was extended to three hours. He started observing the various manufacturing processes and chatting up with the workers at the shop floor. "We carried out a step-by-step Muda (Japanese for waste) elimination exercise. One of the things that they did in this regard was changing the conveyor belt into a one - piece flow workstation.

Gondhalekar, one of the consultants who helped Milton Plastics implement its Kaizen program elaborates: "Take for instance the water bottles that they made. It was done through an assembly line where each of the ten steps required to give a complete bottle (strap, lid et al) was carried out by ten different workers through the assembly line. We suggested that all the workers perform each of the ten steps themselves." This was the one-piece workstation approach. The implementation of the above suggestion helped in doubling productivity. "Where they were taking about 200 seconds, now they take just about 100 seconds to complete all of the ten steps," adds Gondhalekar.

The above instances talk of changes in the manufacturing industry. But what about the fastest growing sector in the country, the service sector? Kaizen can be implemented in the service sector too: Hotel TAJ being a classic example.

"Kaizen has become all encompassing in the service sector because of the time savings it results in, eventually leading to better customer service," elaborates Gondhalekar. The Taj Mahal Hotel in Mumbai decided to go in for Kaizen. They divided our 44 middle managers into 11 cross-functional teams and allocated them different divisions to observe and suggest changes. The teams were asked to implement the suggestions in four days. Some of the changes did result in better customer service. For example, customer check-in normally took about 10 minutes but we managed to cut it down to two minutes by making simple changes like replacing, the credit card swiper under the counter whereas earlier it was at a distance from the counter. They are further in the process of bringing down check-in time to 90 seconds.



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Is this essentially a process change? No. It was an attitude change in the top management that was aimed at by the process of Kaizen. “It’s all about mindset. Earlier the assumption was people entering a Five Star restaurant were there for the experience and hence the delay in executing the order, giving the customer time to muse. However, some customers may be in for a quick cup. The restaurant must be geared to meet their needs too.”

Kaizen would help organizations say sayonara to red tape. As organizations have grown, systems and hierarchy have gained an overpowering importance. Taj is already planning a flat organization structure and is planning to complete the entire revamp in two years time.

Unlike some other methodologies, Kaizen is neither complicated nor expensive. It shows that the problems in the company are not as intractable as they seem. So even if you aren’t a Sherlock Holmes, you still have a chance.