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Introducing... “Kaikaku”

Preparing for the ‘fast and furious’ blitz.

Conventional methods of continuous improvements are in general, long-term activities. Most of these are based on incremental changes, which result in gradual and small improvements throughout an organization. The results are not particularly outstanding and the impact on the overall business is small. In short, it is like improving a hundred different things by 1%.

If this were the rate of change, would we have had amazing creations like laptop computers, camera phones, Internet banking and interactive home appliances? Given the supersonic pace with which these products have emerged and continue to evolve it definitely would not have been possible. Then, how did such innovative thinking take place? The answer is simple... the unending creative evolution that has been taking place in the past few decades. Organizations began to bring together their employees and customers and envision what was required to make life simpler, easier and happier. This was possible through extensive questioning, listening and visualizing, apart from challenging conventional norms and practices.

The blitz!

This process of creating radical improvements is termed ‘Kaikaku’ or Breakthrough Kaizen. Also known as kaizen blitz, Kaikaku is a fast and furious change. Kaikaku involves about a week of highly focused activities where everybody in a business process or specific section works together to create sudden and radical change. A Kaikaku is a blitz formed with the objective of attacking issues and allowing employees to focus solely on process improvement/ problem resolution without even doing their regular daily activities for a week.

However, a successful Kaikaku event requires careful planning and adequate preparation. Some basic, yet crucial points to be noted prior to launching a Kaikaku event include:

1. Adequate data

Changes through Kaikaku cannot be made based on opinions or word of mouth. Decisions to make changes should be based on real time data gathered from existing situations. Value stream mapping and process maps are essential to obtain data for change. Analyses should be done to identify areas where the potential for value creation is more.

2. Visualize the future

After having got a clear picture of the current state, a future state map is created. Next comes the process of visualizing and brainstorming for a perfect state (or desired state). Once this state is visualized, the desired changes are incorporated into the current state map. Realistic yet challenging elements are identified from this desired state map to develop activities for Kaikaku.



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3. Hit the right target

Deciding the right target for the blitz is very crucial. The Kaikaku event should make a substantial impact not just on the organization, but also on its people. Selecting something that can be completed in a week is a taxing task. The change activity selected should be neither too big nor too small. If it is too big chances for success are scarce while a very small one would fail to have the desired impact.

4. Involve every person

A successful blitz requires the involvement of all the members of the process or department concerned. This generally requires shutting down a production line or the department involved in the Kaikaku during the event. Hence, planning and informing should be done well in advance.

5. Garner maximum support!

When working together in teams on radical changes, conflicts and doubts that arise have to be handled with care. Strong leadership support can act as the binding factor even in unfavorable situations. Teams though have to put their best efforts to ensure Kaikaku success.

The coming of Kaikaku

A week prior to the Kaikaku, it is essential to follow a schedule as shown roughly below.

Wednesday: Form a small team (of about 3-4 employees) and prepare them for Kaikaku by explaining its significance and impact on the overall business. The group then undergoes training on various aspects of continuous improvement like identifying 'wastes', apart from the importance of 'value-adding' activities. They are also trained to ensure maximum utilization of resources and work space.

Thursday: Study current processes to identify problem areas and determine those that need to be changed.

Friday: Gather data pertaining to the process/problem in its current state.

The next week consists of highly intensive activities. A typical Kaikaku week at a glance:

Day 1: Begin with a detailed mapping of the target process identified in the previous week. Customer requirements and feedback should be accounted for without fail.

Day 2: Complete the detailed process mapping of the current state and identify all bottlenecks, wastes and changes required in detail.

Day 3: Design a detailed 'future state' map by eliminating wastes and bottlenecks. Prepare an action list detailing the changes to be made.

Day 4: Start implementing the changes identified along with the new working methods designed. This is definitely a trial and error process where some ideas work while some others fail.

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Day 5: The Kaikaku team formally starts working with the new process and fine-tunes everything so as to ensure smooth and normal functioning the next week. If small changes are still required after the weeklong blitz, they can be added on gradually but completed within a fortnight.

If problems identified or processes to be changed are long and complex, the Kaikaku cannot be completed within a week. In such cases, the Kaikaku event can be broken down into bits and implemented over a fortnight or twenty days.

Organizations often face problems that seem to be resolved, but resurface sooner or later. This happens so often that gradually such problems become accepted as part of the process. The first part of this article introduced us to a new concept of the 'blitz', which can be used to attack and eliminate long-standing problems. Termed Kaikaku, or Breakthrough Kaizen, this blitz is an excellent technique to kick-start changes to resolve major problems completely.

Though Kaikaku is not a technique that can be used on a daily basis, it helps to create radical changes as early as a week. Kaikaku is essentially a tool for change management. For large processes, where changes cannot be implemented in a short span of a week, Kaikaku can be broken down into bite-sized chunks and implemented in stages.

Similar to the intensive weeklong blitz, this approach begins with training on various aspects of continuous improvement. A week later, the Kaikaku team meets to analyze the workplace and existing processes to identify areas for change. Within the next two or three days, existing and future process maps are developed. By the end of the third day, the team develops an action plan that includes changes to be implemented immediately, people responsible for changes, and how the changes have to be communicated throughout the organization. After another week, the team comes together to implement the major changes. As changes are brought on-line, the team members practice the new methods. By the end of the fifth day of this week, the workplace is transformed but all changes may not be complete. The remaining changes are then implemented based on a month long action plan.

Irrespective of the approach followed, Kaikaku has been successfully used to reengineer design and development processes, marketing processes, and for improvements in areas as diverse as accounting and call centers.

However, before implementing Kaikaku, organizations have to understand some vital facts. Hiroyuki Hirano, a leading Japanese quality expert, compiled Ten Commandments of Kaikaku, which are discussed below.

1. Ring out the old, and ring in the new!

It is true that conventional thinking often prevails and hinders new product/process development. This is also the case with the design of new facilities. When new plants are commissioned, the layout and processes are designed keeping in view current products with provision for changes related to technology. Although slight changes are made as time progresses, radical changes are not incorporated until a company is forced to do so thanks to competition or technological advancements. According to Hirano, it is critical

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for businesses to visualize the future and continually make radical changes to conform to this vision.

2. A positive attitude is critical for making radical changes.

Any change, big or small, is bound to face opposition and criticism from various fronts. It is very easy to find fault with new ideas, as nothing is perfect. The challenge during Kaikaku is to be positive and align the best efforts of people to implement radical changes on the spot. This is far more effective than postponing new changes till a state of perfection is planned.

3. Excuses to avoid changes are the biggest obstacles; they should never be accepted.

Resisting change is easier than implementing it. This wrong notion is what hinders most continuous improvements and change activities. The Chairman of Toyota, the 'best-in-class' automobile company insists, "Failure to change is an evil. I not only want everyone at Toyota to change constantly, but also not to be obstacles in the path of change". He expected managers and supervisors at Toyota to develop and implement annual change plans.

Looks like the world's pioneer of lean and leader in innovation and quality is always on the run fearing competition. 'No' says the chairman firmly. According to him, it is this constant and continuous change that has helped Toyota become one of the best corporations in the world today.

4. Seeking perfection should not be the only aim. Even a 50% improvement is excellent if it is done on the spot.

Why is change considered difficult? Why is that most people are resistant to change? The answer is simple. Right from our early days, we have been taught to be careful and not make mistakes. The education system lowers grades when mistakes are committed. *Ironically, isn't it very true that we learn best from our mistakes?*

Hirano insists that mistakes must be allowed so that people realize and learn from them. The aim should be to immediately look for the root causes of mistakes to prevent them from recurring.

Hirano recommends the use of *Jidoka*, where mistakes are not punished, but accepted. Moreover, employees are empowered to stop working and also stop team members from proceeding with work until the root cause of the mistake is tackled. Hirano cites the classic example of Toyota to explain this. During his numerous visits to Toyota's manufacturing units, Hirano observed that operators often stopped production lines for a minute or two to correct mistakes. This not only indicated that the company was serious about preventing defects from reaching the customer, but also gave immense confidence to front-line employees like operators. They were thus encouraged to take vital decisions independently.

Kaikaku proves that *employees are crucial and they make a difference*. Apart from changing the way they work, employees also change the way the workplace looks and feels.

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5. Do not postpone correcting mistakes.

Mistakes are more often than not, underreported or hidden. This is because employees fear criticism or ridicule. Employees who report their mistakes are generally chided or mocked at. Hirano stresses the need to shun this attitude and instead consider mistakes as learning opportunities. Remember, only a learning organization grows. However, care should also be taken to ensure that mistakes are not repeated as they can prove to be very dear.

6. Use of thinking ability is critical for growing organizations.

Let us look back at the pre-Industrial revolution era. People developed and practiced their own skills and there was variability in work. Take the simple instance of a carpenter. He would do everything, right from sourcing wood, designing individual pieces of furniture, cutting and carving out designs before presenting his product to the customer. The Industrial Revolution and scientific management changed all this. The thinking shifted from using individual creativity to finding the best way to do things. Once the best way to accomplish a task was identified, the next step was to ensure that everyone followed it. Thus, processes were repeated over and over again, day after day.

This enhanced productivity and revenue, which in turn made life convenient in terms of better products and less work. However, work became repetitive and boring. People used less of their creativity and thinking abilities and were focused largely on following the leader. The early American industry worked in this fashion.

It was at this time that Toyota and other Japanese companies decided to change the system to incorporate creativity into work. This required employees to form teams and work together. They followed Kodak's people suggestion system, which led to the initiation of Quality Circles (QCs), employee participation systems and Poka-Yoke.

7. Go for ten people's ideas to get the best rather than following one person's knowledge.

Conventionally, decision-making and problem solving always belonged to the domain of managers and supervisors. These leaders were there to decide, direct, and to inspire other employees to work. However, this system failed to handle global competition, innovation and customer demands. Organizations began to realize the need to harness the creative talents of every employee to derive the best.

Hirano went to a number of manufacturing plants to study various aspects of continuous improvement. On one such visit to a shop floor, he shot a 5-minute video of a process. Engineers and managers walked around the plant at regular intervals to ensure that processes were running smooth. Yet, Hirano spotted various flaws.

In order to capture the real power of people involvement, Hirano took the video clip to a meeting room. He asked a team of people to identify wastes and suggest ways to eliminate them. At first, there was complete silence and reluctance on the side of the team members, but once the ice was broken, ideas poured in. This proved a very powerful exercise in improving creativity at workplace.

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8. Answer the question ‘why’ five times during problem solving.

Hirano, along with Dr. Shingo and other quality experts once visited the plant of Granville-Phillips, a manufacturer of vacuum testing equipment. Despite employing the best engineers, the company took more than 6 months to come up with new product ideas. Whenever a new product was introduced, the company experienced more than 90% defects in the final stage. The CEO of Granville-Phillips was distraught and requested Dr. Shingo and the team to suggest ways to improve the situation. The team began by studying the entire process in a sequence from the start of the process and the design stage to the final product outcome. At every stage, plant managers and engineers presented the team with their problems. Instead of directly providing them with solutions, Dr. Shingo and team asked them a few basic questions. This they did by asking the question ‘why’ five times. This got the engineers and managers thinking and the solutions to the problems emerged as if by magic! Asking ‘why’ five times is a simple way of getting people to think and question conventional beliefs.

9. Do not spend money on Kaikaku

During his numerous visits to Toyota’s manufacturing units, Hirano observed that equipment was not as sophisticated as he had expected. The same was the case with Toyota’s sub-contractors. The Chief of Toyota explained that their innovation and quality were the result of their ingenious Toyota Production System (TPS) and not due to sophistication of machinery.

During his visits to American plants, Hirano observed that machine centres were upgraded regularly with million-dollar NC machines, control systems and other sophisticated equipment. Dr. Shingo pointed out how unwise it was for these companies to spend millions of dollars on sophisticated equipment, while only a few dollars and a new understanding would have accomplished much more. Likewise, while Toyota’s engineers were on the shop floor helping employees to make improvements, engineers at the American plants sat in offices, flipping through catalogues and discussing what new equipment to invest in. Wrong... first check out the most untapped resource you possess...*your employees’ creativity!*

10. Kaikaku has no bounds!

According to Hirano, the power of Kaikaku is amazing. The investment is minimal...creative thinking and the ingenuity to challenge existing practices. The results are amazing.

However, a crucial aspect for the success of Kaikaku is appropriate documentation detailing changes. Comprehensive information and guidelines to support new practices need to be in place.

Finally, it must be ascertained that there is no drifting back to the old ways when things get tough or go wrong. Rightly said, the success of a blitz depends on how little of the old methods exist once it is over. Remember, nothing can beat the creativity and brainpower of human beings!