



TenStep Supplemental Paper

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The Basics of Kaizen - Continuous Improvement

Kaizen is a Japanese word, which means “gradual, orderly and continuous improvement with minimal investment”. Kaizen is an ongoing process focusing on elimination of wastes in all systems of an organization.

Two Elements of Kaizen

Improvement/change for the better and ongoing/continuity are the two elements that construct Kaizen. Absence of one of the element would not be Kaizen. For example, the expression “business as usual” contains continuity but not improvement. The term “breakthrough” includes change or improvement but not continuity. Kaizen should contain both the elements.

Maintenance, Innovation and Kaizen

These three improvement functions should occur in an organization simultaneously.

1. **Maintenance** refers to smooth functioning of current status, setting up of procedures and implementation of standards. The majority of a company’s workers are typically responsible for maintenance.
2. **Innovations** are breakthrough activities such as buying new equipment, developing new markets or directing Research & Development.
3. **Kaizen** is an ongoing function involving small steps that provide continuous improvement. Lower/middle management and workers, with encouragement and direction from the top management, should implement it.

Japanese Kaizen activities for individuals or groups veer round the following themes.

- Work improvement.
- Working environment improvement.
- Process improvement.
- Machine capability improvement (minimum down-time)
- Improvement in production aids (fixtures, tools, etc.)
- Improvements in service areas
- Quality improvement.
- Improvement in customer service and customer relations.
- Improvements for new products (ideas)
- Improvement in individual people capabilities

The belief held by the Japanese management is that managers should spend 50% of their time in making improvements. The starting point of Kaizen is identifying waste, which



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would include reducing and eliminating excess inventory, downtime, spoilage and the overproduction of interim components or finished products.

Management Focus in Kaizen

After the elimination of waste, the management focus for Kaizen should include:

- Achieving maximum efficiency and quality
- Eliminating processes that cause human fatigue
- Maximizing utilization of facilities, tools etc.
- An open management style that allows questioning of the existing systems and processes.
- Providing opportunities for employees to learn and encouraging them to do so
- Encouraging teamwork and cooperation.
- Striving for continuous improvement at all levels.
- Improving systems and processes.

Kaizen is a culture initiative. Your organization must have leadership that encourages and incents people to continuously improve their ability to meet expectations of high quality, low cost, and on-time delivery.