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Kaizen

Gaining the Full Benefits of Continuous Improvement

How does "change" happen in your organization?

Is it through major initiatives, or is it part of the ongoing way you work? Some types of change inevitably need a major project; meaning months of hard work, big budgets and upheaval. But, often undervalued, an alternative or complementary approach to improving systems, processes and so on, is through more subtle, ongoing changes and continuous improvements.

Once a new major change has happened, perhaps a new system or structure put in place, is everything perfect? Will the new processes stay set in stone until the next major change in a few years' time? Almost certainly not. In fact, if this attitude were taken, you would probably see a gradual decline in benefits after the initial step improvement, as inefficiencies and bad practice crept in.

There is always room to make small improvements, challenge the status quo, and tune processes and practice on an everyday basis. In fact, you and your colleagues probably do this week in, week out without calling it "change" or even "continuous improvement". You're already getting real benefits from the intuitive approach to continuous improvement. And over time, all of these incremental changes add up, and make a significant positive impact on your team and organization.

One approach to continuous, incremental improvement is called **kaizen**. It originated in Japan and the word translates to mean change (*kai*) for the good (*zen*).

Kaizen is based on the philosophical belief that *everything* can be improved: Some organizations look at a process and see that it's running fine; Organizations that follow the principle of Kaizen see a process that can be improved. This means that nothing is ever seen as a status quo – there are continuous efforts to improve which result in small, often imperceptible, changes over time. These incremental changes add up to substantial changes over the longer term, without having to go through any radical innovation. It can be a much gentler and employee-friendly way to institute the changes that must occur as a business grows and adapts to its changing environment.

Understanding the Approach

Because Kaizen is more a philosophy than a specific tool, its approach is found in many different process improvement methods ranging from Total Quality Management (TQM), to the use of employee suggestion boxes. Under kaizen, all employees are responsible for identifying the gaps and inefficiencies and everyone, at every level in the organization, suggests where improvement can take place.

Kaizen aims for improvements in productivity, effectiveness, safety, and waste reduction, and those

who follow the approach often find a whole lot more in return:

1. Less waste – inventory is used more efficiently as are employee skills;
2. People are more satisfied – they have a direct impact on the way things are done;
3. Improved commitment – team members have more of a stake in their job and are more inclined to commit to doing a good job;
4. Improved retention – satisfied and engaged people are more likely to stay;
5. Improved competitiveness – increases in efficiency tend to contribute to lower costs and higher quality products;
6. Improved consumer satisfaction – coming from higher quality products with fewer faults;
7. Improved problem solving – looking at processes from a solutions perspective allows employees to solve problems continuously;
8. Improved teams – working together to solve problems helps build and strengthen existing teams.

Another Japanese term associated with kaizen is **muda**, which means waste. Kaizen is aimed at decreasing waste through eliminating overproduction, improving quality, being more efficient, having less idle time, and reducing unnecessary activities. All these translate to money savings and turn potential losses into profits.

The kaizen philosophy was developed to improve manufacturing processes, and it is one of the elements which led to the success of Japanese manufacturing through high quality and low costs. However, you can gain the benefits of the kaizen approach in many other working environments too, and at both a personal level or for your whole team or organization.

For more information about how your enterprise can benefit from Kaizen, a Lean Manufacturing tool. Please contact your MEP representative and make Kaizen a part of your 5P Strategy for Profitability.