

From 'KAI-ZEN' to 'I CAN!'

Improvement = Consistent commitment to good change

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Kai = change Zen = good When they are used together = *improvement*

Kai-zen came to North America in the mid 1980's, after becoming an integral part of the Japanese management theory. Western management consultants used it to embrace a wide range of management practices, which were regarded as primarily Japanese. These practices were thought to be the secrets of the strength of Japanese companies in the areas of continual improvement rather than innovation.

According to this theory, the strength of Japanese organizations lay in their **attention to 'process'** rather than results. They also concentrated the team efforts to continually improve imperfections at each stage of the process. According to them, over the long term, the final result was more reliable, of better quality, more advanced, and attractive to clients and less expensive than Western Management practices.

Its 'roots' however are from an American influence following the 2nd world war. General Douglas MacArthur approached several leading US experts to visit Japan to advise them on how to proceed in rebuilding their country and their economy.

One such expert was **Dr. Edwards Deming**. He initially came over to conduct a census, but noticed the newly emerging industries were having difficulty. He had been involved in reducing waste in US War manufacturing and drew on that experience to offer his advice. By the 1950's, he was a regular visitor, offering advice to Japanese manufactures that were having challenges in terms of raw materials, components, and investment; in addition suffering from low morale in the nation and workforce.

By the 1970's, many of Japan's leading organizations had embraced Dr. Deming's key points for management. Most are as valid today as they were a half-century ago. Here are some I felt relate to the concept called Kai-zen.

- An improved philosophy to effectively deal with change and client needs.
- Constant pursuit of purpose required for improvement of products and services.
- Improving every process for planning, production, and service.
- Instituting or embedding on going, on the job training for all staff using a variety of methods and ideas.
- Instituting and supporting leadership that is aimed and focused on helping people do a better job. (*Isn't that the true purpose of 21st Century leadership and management?*)
- Breaking down the barriers and boundaries that exist within departments and people. (*GE's CEO, Jack Welch took this one on personally in his style of management.*)
- Encouraging education for the self-improvement of every member of the organization.
- Top management is committed to improve 'all' these points, specifically quality and leadership.

Adapting the Kai-zen attitude to our western way of doing business requires **a major change in corporate culture** – creating a corporate culture that:

- Admits openly and honestly there are problems and challenges.

- Encourages a positive, collaborative, consultative attitude to solving or overcoming them.
- Actively '*devolves*' responsibility to the most appropriate or effective level. The person who is in the best position to deal with the challenge or problem needs to have the tools and the authority to do so.
- Promotes continuous skills-based training and development of attitudes.

Traditionally, the Japanese approach has embedded Kai-zen in its hierarchical structural, although it gives substantially more responsibilities within certain fixed boundaries. The **key features** of this management approach and focus are:

- **Attention to process, rather than results:** Analyze every part of the process down to the smallest detail, with a view to improving them. Looks at how employee's actions, equipment and materials can be improved.
- **Cross-functional management:** Management team has an expanded focus on helping improve the process and the skills of the people outside the typical western turf wars.
- Use of **quality circles:** and other tools to support their commitment to continuous improvement.

A range of tools have been developed, along the KAI-ZEN line, to assist companies to make **tangible improvements:**

- **Quality Control Circles:** groups of people whose primary focus and purpose is to continually improve quality.
- **Process-oriented management:** more attention focused on the 'how' (*the process*) rather than the 'what' (*the task*).
- **Visible management:** top executives are being seen, '*walking the job*' (management by walking around), and being available to 'see' and consult on each stage of the process.
- **Cross-functional management:** working across functional divides and typical barriers or boundaries, to provide more unity, sense of team, and a wider vision that engages and involves everyone.
- **Just-in-time management:** control of stock, and other materials and components to avoid unnecessary expenditures.
- **PDCA:** a process of **Plan, Do, Check, Act** to assist in solving problems or challenges.
- **Statistical process control:** enable each machine operator or member of a team to control and measure quality at each stage of the process.

In the Japanese approach to Kai-zen, all of these tools are used in a holistic manner. **Contrast this to the current western approach:** where some of these tools are individually introduced as the '*answer*' to every problem or challenge, without consideration of the context within which they were designed to work effectively.

Some **perceived benefits** of this Kai-zen type of approach:

- Can lead to a reduction of waste
- Can increase productivity
- Relatively easy to introduce – requires no major capital investment
- Can lower the break even point
- Enables organizations to react quickly to market changes
- Appropriate for fast and slow economies as well as growing or mature markets

Some **challenges of introducing Kai-zen** into the western management mind-set:

- Can be difficult to achieve Kai-zen in practice, as it requires a complete or major change in attitude and culture. It needs the energy and commitment of all employees. It also requires a substantive investment of time.
- Can be difficult to maintain enthusiasm for several reasons: some see Kai-zen as a threat to their jobs; poor ideas tend to be put forward along with good ideas, which can at times be de-motivating; by implication, there is never a complete satisfaction.
- Continuous improvement is not sufficient or a stand-alone approach in itself. Major innovation is still needed. There is a danger on becoming '*evolutionary*' in focus to the exclusion of being '*revolutionary*' or innovation sensitive.

In this turbulent, global economy, organizations need to look seriously at any and all methods, tools, techniques and training processes that might help in this quest for growth. Kai-zen's step-by-step approach is in direct contrast to the great leaps forward many organizations experience via the innovation avenue.

It is almost as though we need to develop a '**bi-focal**' approach and viewpoint, which is one that encompasses steady, continuous improvement of current processes, products and services, while looking for and encouraging creativity and innovation in moving the organization to the next level. (*I do this in the development of my programs and publications.*)

Kai-zen should free senior managers to think about the long-term future of the organization, look for new opportunities, and move to a concentration on '**strategic**' issues. Kai-zen can support improvement of '*existing*' activities; but it will not provide the impetus for the innovation process, which often provides our great leaps forward. A **balanced approach** is called for here.

- It is the role of '**strategic**' leadership to take responsibility for the implementation of an effective corporate mission (*purpose or soul*), reward, and the organizational structure.
- It is the responsibility of '**tactical and strategic**' managers to model and practice sound leadership, promote good teamwork, and to work to ensure everyone understands their roles and the process itself.
- It is the responsibility of '**everyone**' in the organization (*from front-line to senior management*), to measure themselves and their teams, to identify in quantifiable, measurable terms, areas for improvement, to generate ideas to change practice and procedures. Then to continue measurement to insure this improvement has been achieved, recorded, and celebrated.
- Each time it is measured, it can be analyzed and a new standard achieved or set and measured. This becomes the **cycle of continual improvement**. (I CAN!)

Here is a typical or **suggested cycle or process**:

Generate ideas, evaluate ideas, decide on action, plan implementation, design measurement system, take action, set new standard, measure, analyze, define problem/desired state, identify areas for improvement, generate ideas...etc.

Everyone on your team needs to be '*totally*' committed to this cycle of continuous improvement. Each team member must be given the knowledge, skills and tools to be able to participate fully and enthusiastically. To participate, not only within their own respective teams; but also across the organization as a whole, as a part of a cross-functional team.

For this to become a reality, work must be done to reinforce or build the confidence within your staff to take on greater responsibility, or to make decisions for themselves. This is crucial to its success. In addition to specific skills training and use of tools and knowledge, it is important for us to work on the '**climate for change**'. To ensure it is embedded in our corporate culture.

The **core values** within a Kai-zen based approach to which each of us can aspire are:

- **Trust and respect** for every member of the team across the organization, not just his or her own team. (*Not just their department, their own specialization, expertise, or level.*)
- Each individual on a team should be able to **openly admit any mistakes** or failings they've made or exist in their role, and work on doing a better job the next time. Responsibility is an individual commitment. **Progress is impossible without the ability to admit, learn from and move forward from mistakes.**

Recently, I listened to 'A Power Talk' CD from Anthony Robbins, in which he shared his concept of Kai-zen for use in our day-to-day lives and roles as leaders. He was quite passionate about his commitment to this concept (*ok – when is he not passionate?*), and for its implementation in our daily lives. He advocated a commitment to constant and never ending improvement. I'd like to take a '*robbins-esque*' approach, and challenge each of you to take a moment to digest what we've discussed about this transplanted US – filtered thru Japan approach to management, as a part of your leadership role.

If you and your team are going to be successful in taking your organization to the next level of growth, each of you will need to get a firm foundation and focus on the process of Kai-zen style continual improvement.

This is in addition to your personal leadership in applied innovation or **Ideas At Work!** -- as they apply to your changing roles and the teams you seek to lead.

My challenge is for each of you: Develop an '**I CAN!**' **approach and attitude to your leadership**, and to equipping and inspiring those you would seek to lead. '**Improvement is continual and never ending, and it starts with me!**

Gee, that sounds like something I've heard, or even said on occasion... "*To the leading edge leader, to the successful entrepreneur -- school is never out, and the education never ends.*"

Enjoy the journey! After all, in the '**Kai-zen**' or '**I CAN!**' world, the journey is the goal and provides the sense of achievement and satisfaction.

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