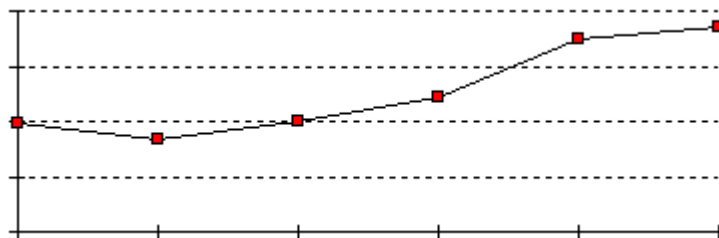




## Kaizen: what does it mean?



## Kaizen: what does it mean?

By Carlo Scodanibbio for The Sunday Times of Malta

### *the home improver*

If you consider your house more than just a shelter and a place in which you eat and sleep, in other words if you consider your house a "home", a cosy, warm nest for yourself and your family, probably you will take great care of it, and you will gladly dedicate time, efforts and money to make it even warmer, cosier, more functional and better looking. In fact, you will not just maintain it in its present state, but you will try to render it better and better: you will renew plumbing and electrics in due time; you will paint or polish regularly doors and windows; but you will also add new pieces of furniture or replace some unsuited ones..... and you will shop around with your half to find some nice pieces of soft furnishing, or wall pictures, or antiques... and you will place flowerpots and ornamental plants here and there..... and if you really love your home, this will be an endless process: even when you believe that your house is very nice indeed, still, you will not feel totally satisfied, and you will carry on forever making changes, and adding, and replacing, and moving things around.... and bettering, and refurbishing, and improving.... Your home becomes your pride, represents yourself, is part of you, and you are part of your home. And if you have just a minor tendency to perfectionism, you will never be totally happy with your house, and you will carry on year after year with this never ending improvement process.

### *kairyo and kaizen*

The process you are doing to your house is a Kaizen process. The Japanese word Kaizen means "step-by-step, continuous improvement". Now, assuming you are not satisfied with the present state of your house, there are several approaches you may adopt: you may, for instance, decide to buy a new, totally different type of house; or you might decide to keep the one you live in, but you will call an architect and have it completely renewed, re-furnished and re-decorated to suit your taste; or else, especially if your budget is limited (but not only in this case), you may decide to improve it step-by-step, month after month, year after year, and do it yourself (or with your half), or, anyhow, with your direct involvement, with your own design, and under your direct supervision and control. In the first two cases, you do a Kairyo type of improvement, or large-size, technological improvement. In the last case you improve in a Kaizen fashion, or step-by-step.

Which is the best approach ? None is better than the other, they are simply different, and suited to different circumstances. In many instances, the two approaches may even be complementary, first the one, and then the other.

Still, there is a major difference between the two approaches: if you go Kairyo, you mostly use your money to get what you want; whereas, if you go Kaizen, you mainly use your brain (and your hands, and your heart, and your creativity, and.....).

This is the real difference between the two approaches: without touching the validity of the Kairyo approach in all those cases in which it is well suited, the Kaizen approach is mostly based on people's best abilities and skills.

Kaizen has been developed in the '70s - '80s by the Japanese Industry, in order to reach high levels of quality in industrial processes and in associated output products. It has been confined to the quality field for several years; and then applied also to the productivity issue, with the aim of achieving high levels of efficiency; and finally it has been applied to the overall organisational structure of an enterprise, the goal being to drive it towards an excellent, or world-class status.

### *kaizen and people*

The true nature of Kaizen is in the human content it carries. Improvement through Kaizen practice means deep, systematic and continuous involvement of people (everybody), that, by using certain techniques, but mainly their brain, cause a process of improvement to start, develop, and never end. The Kaizen motto is "....today better than yesterday, tomorrow better than today....". The concept of continuous improvement is applied in all directions: industrial processes can be improved - working methods can be improved - quality defects can be eliminated - waste can be reduced - customer service can be bettered - the working environment can be improved - boss/subordinates relationship can be improved..... the sky is the limit. Now, improvements in industry can be obtained in many ways: new technology can bring improvement to a process or to products' quality - technology can also bring improvements in productivity and in efficiency - it can also bring improvements to customer service - external consultants can bring improvements to working methods, to processes, to interpersonal relations. But these types of improvements do not fall under the Kaizen umbrella.

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Kaizen is improvement through the poor man approach: the poor man does not spend money on improvements because he has no money to throw at it - he rather uses his wisdom, and his brain, and his creativity, and his talent, and his patience....

### *kaizen is brain power*

This is the real power of Kaizen: by using their brain to obtain improvements, people perfect their skills and increase even more their talent. And there is an extra benefit: they are more satisfied. If you are a wealthy man, and build a sumptuous villa designed by the best architect in town, you may or may not be as satisfied as the average man who, through years of patient, creative work has transformed his house into a cosy, warm nest, filled with handmade decorations, each corner showing his dedication, each ornamental object purchased through intelligent savings but selected with care and rich in taste, and each detail showing and proving his love..... Each step of improvement, once completed, brings satisfaction, but probably the real satisfaction is in the improvement process itself: because improving mainly or primarily through creative efforts is a tough challenge, and challenge is a wonderful source of satisfaction.

### *tools for kaizen*

Surely, brain alone is not sufficient: specific techniques are available for Kaizen oriented people to perform effectively. Like a home improver needs to know sufficiently about interior decorating, and antiques' restoration, and soft furnishing (and landscaping, painting, plumbing, wallpapering.....), similarly the industrial Kaizen improver needs to know about problem-solving techniques, and tools for creativity, and Pareto and Ishikawa Diagrams (to mention but a few of the available instruments for systematic improvement). Besides, in industry, valid Kaizen requires an extra skill from people: the ability to work effectively in team. Starting from the assumption that "the Pope and the Peasant together know more than the Pope alone", the Japanese have extensively deployed and mastered the "team" concept for real, methodical improvement. Their Quality Circles, for instance, are known world-wide. In western industrial environments the concept of "effective team for systematic improvement" has somehow failed to deliver high level results, mainly due to considerable cultural differences. The ability to perform in team effectively, intentionally and regularly, with the objective of improving systematically all weak areas of an

enterprise, seems to be, in the western world, not as high as in the far east.

And many attempts to transplant Japanese methods and Kaizen approaches into western enterprises have somehow failed. The truth is that the original Kaizen concept must be tailored to suit not only the western industrial environment, but even the specific enterprise, taking into due consideration its culture and values (and objectives, strategies, policies.....). Like a home improver cannot and will not merely transform his house following recommendations and ideas of an interior decorating magazine (ideas that he will rather vet and adapt to his or her specific needs and taste), similarly an enterprise willing to undergo a process of continuous, systematic improvement will have to identify, define and deploy a specific "style" and specific, personalised methods to pave its "road to excellence".

### *the home lover*

And there is a last and very difficult obstacle to overcome, for a western enterprise, when undergoing a Kaizen program. In the true nature of Kaizen, improvements are made by people, working together in team (to obtain a "resonance" effect), and using effectively and efficiently their abilities, skills and brains. But they must also be intimately convinced of what they do, and they must also share a "vision" of how the future will be, of what they can achieve, and of the common benefits associated. If this deep feeling is missing or considerably lacking, only superficial improvements can be obtained. A genuine home improver is first of all a "home lover", and has a vision of what his or her home will become, and has feelings and sensations in mind, and emotions, and a "creative tension" which drives him or her in the wanted direction..... a genuine home improver has a sense of belonging, of "symbiosis" with his or her home..... and this will eventually make the difference between a warm nest and a sumptuous but artificial house. Similarly, in industry, a positive sense of involvement, of belonging, and a "shared" vision, are strong prerequisites for an effective, Kaizen style, path of improvement.

Individuals should ideally understand and share enterprise's objectives, and feel part of the enterprise, with a bit of love for it, like a genuine home improver.....

This is, most probably, the toughest challenge for western management.

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Carlo Scodanibbio, born in Macerata (Italy) in 1944, holds an Italian doctor degree in Electrical Engineering (Politecnico di Milano - 1970).

He has over 49 years of experience in Plant Engineering, Project Engineering and Project Management, as well as Industrial Engineering and Operations Management.

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His area of intervention is: World Class Performance for Small and Medium Enterprises in the Project, Manufacturing, and Service sectors.

His favourite area of action is: the "lean" area.

He has co-operated, inter-alia, with the Cyprus Chamber of Commerce, the Cyprus Productivity Centre, the Malta Federation of Industry, the Mauritius Employers' Federation, the Romanian Paper Industry Association, the United Nations Industrial Development Organisation and the University of Cape Town.

His courses and seminars, conducted in English, Italian and French, have been attended by well over 20.000 Entrepreneurs, Managers, Supervisors and Workers. They feature a very high level of interaction, and are rich in simulations, exercising and real case studies. The approach is invariably "hands-on" and addressed to immediate, practical application.

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