Kaizen - Continuous Improvement

Kaizen is a Japanese word made of two parts: kai, meaning change, and zen, meaning good. In business, it means continuous improvement through many small steps, made by everyone, every day. The idea grew in Japanese companies after the Second World War. In 1986, Masaaki Imai helped bring it to a worldwide audience in his book Kaizen: The Key to Japan's Competitive Success. Today, hospitals, banks, offices and factories use kaizen to work better without large budgets.

1. Small Steps Every Day

Kaizen prefers many small improvements to one big leap. Small changes are cheap, quick to try and easy to undo if they fail. Over months, these small gains add up to a large difference. The habit of improving matters more than any single change.

Example: A man wants to get fit, but every big plan fails after a week. Using small steps, he starts with a ten-minute walk after lunch each day. Three months later, he walks for an hour and feels much stronger.

At work: Sundus leads the reception team of a busy clinic, where patients wait forty minutes to check in. Instead of asking for an expensive new system, she uses small steps: each person suggests one small change a week. The first one, printing the forms before the patients arrive, saves several minutes for every patient.

2. Go to the Gemba

Gemba is a Japanese word for the real place where the work happens. In a factory, it is the production floor and in a clinic, it is the front desk. Kaizen asks us to go to the gemba and see the problem with our own eyes. By watching the real work, and talking with the people who do it, we find causes that no report shows.

Example: A restaurant owner hears that guests order less in the evening. She goes to the gemba and has dinner at her own tables. In the dim evening light, the menu is hard to read, so she prints it in larger letters.

At work: Sundus goes to the gemba and spends a whole morning at the front desk. She sees that patients are asked for the same identity card twice, at two different windows. The team removes the second check, and the queue moves faster.

3. The PDCA Cycle

Kaizen uses a simple four-step cycle for every improvement: Plan, Do, Check and Act. It is often linked to the quality experts Walter Shewhart and William Edwards Deming. In Plan, we study

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the problem and choose one change to test. In Do, we try it on a small scale, and in Check, we compare the results with the plan. In Act, we keep the change if it works, or we learn and plan again.

Example: A family wants a lower electricity bill and uses the PDCA cycle. They plan to switch off the air conditioning in empty rooms, do it for one month, and check the new bill. The bill is lower, so they act by making it a house rule.

At work: Sundus applies the PDCA cycle to missing documents. The team plans text reminders the day before each visit and tests them with one doctor for two weeks. The check shows fewer missing papers, so they act and send reminders for all doctors.

4. Everyone Improves

In kaizen, improvement is not only the job of managers or experts. Everyone, from the newest employee to the director, is invited to suggest changes. Managers support this by listening, giving quick answers and thanking people for their ideas. When a change works, it becomes the new standard way of working, so that the gain is not lost.

Example: A family wants calmer mornings, so everyone improves the routine, even the youngest child. The child suggests packing the school bags the evening before. It works, and it becomes the family's new standard.

At work: Sundus makes sure everyone improves, including the cleaners and the newest receptionist. The new receptionist suggests a clear sign that shows patients which window to use. The best changes are written into a simple standard, and the waiting time keeps falling.

Conclusion

In summary, kaizen means continuous improvement through small steps, every day. We go to the gemba to see the real work, we test each change with the PDCA cycle, and we invite everyone to improve. Each successful change becomes the new standard, and the next improvement starts from there. Small, steady steps, taken together, can change a whole organisation.

Sources

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- Note: KAIZEN™ is used by Kaizen Institute as a trademark; here the word is used in its general meaning of continuous improvement.

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