

# LEADERSHIP

## Every Journey Of 1,000 Miles Starts With A Single Step: The Art And Science Of Kaizen

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Tom Phillips

### What is Kaizen?

Kaizen is a Chinese and Japanese word that means 'Good Change' - Kai meaning change and Zen meaning good. In the world of business it has a broader interpretation and application that equates to continuous improvement.

Kaizen originated in post-World War 2 Japan. The Japanese government, recognising that it needed help to rebuild its industrial base, invited American industrialists and economists to help revitalise the Japanese economy. In particular, Professor William Edwards Deming is credited with being the forefather of Kaizen. He, amongst others, identified that Japan could not afford to start from scratch (radical change). They did not have the time or resource to build an entirely new manufacturing base, so they had to work with what they had; making small scale changes wherever possible (Kaizen). This became known as the process of continuous improvement that is fundamental to the theory of Kaizen.

Kaizen is a philosophy adopted by many organisations. It can be applied from the shop floor to the boardroom. Individuals at all levels can apply the theory of Kaizen, but it can also be applied to systems and processes. Today, it is used in many diverse fields such as healthcare, banking, coaching and mentoring, government, counselling, psychotherapy, education and car manufacturing.

Kaizen is often described as a 'humanistic approach' as it is humans that create (or prevent) change. The principle of Kaizen can help individuals and organisations to achieve long-term large-scale change by identifying and focusing on small-scale change. Individuals who are aware of and practice Kaizen often feel empowered and enabled as they are focusing on change that they can implement within the workplace, often by making small changes to their own behaviours. For example, if you were to get up 30 minutes earlier at the start of the day, what would that extra 30 minutes allow you to do? Spend more time with your family prior to heading off into a busy day? Clear some emails, make some calls, read new articles relevant to your profession? All of these small changes could have a hugely positive impact on your life.

### Why does Kaizen work?

Kaizen works because it is easier for our conscious and subconscious brain to accept small-scale change. In fact, our conscious and subconscious brain will actively resist large-scale change. Imagine attending a meeting in work one day and your boss says the following:

"Our performance is way behind target. We need to radically overhaul our standard operating procedures immediately! I have drawn up a list of ideas that I want you to implement from today!"

What would you think and feel? How would you react? Conversely, imagine that your boss said the following:

"We are in danger of missing our targets and I know that none of us wants that to happen. Starting today I'd like us all to identify changes we can make to our standard operating procedures that will help to make us more effective. I welcome ideas from everyone. I know that some ideas will be easier to implement than others and I know that we can find the answers ourselves."

What would you think and feel? How would you react? Which of these approaches is most likely to succeed? The second approach is less likely to create a sense of fear or resentment and is, therefore, far more likely to generate the ideas and necessary changes. It is also far more likely to gain commitment from you and other employees as it looks for your ideas and supports their implementation.

How could you apply the theory of Kaizen?

### Applying Kaizen at work

As a manager or leader, could you:

- find small, good behaviour to recognise in someone's performance
- recognise that good behaviour verbally or in writing
- be specific about what that good



behaviour looked like and the impact it had on you or others

- repeat that as appropriate?

As an employee, could you:

- acknowledge when a system or process isn't working
- identify a solution
- break the solution down into small steps/stages
- identify the stages that you can implement yourself
- implement them
- assess their impact.
- repeat or modify that as appropriate?

## Applying Kaizen in your personal life

How could you use Kaizen in your personal life?

The single biggest reason that fitness programmes fail is that they ask for too much, too soon e.g. train five times per week, give up fried food, chocolate and alcohol, take supplements and drink more water! No wonder many of us feel overwhelmed and, ultimately, give up.

How about small steps as an alternative approach to losing weight and getting fitter? For example:

- identify how much you want to lose
- break that down into small, achievable targets e.g. 2-3 lbs per week
- identify just one part of your diet you could change e.g. swap chocolate for fruit
- identify just one fitness habit you could change e.g. take the stairs instead of the lift at work
- assess the impact of these changes after 2 or 3 weeks

- sustain the new habits and add in other, smaller changes
- reward yourself when you reach your target weight
- keep repeating the new behaviours until they become habit.

## Remember!

Every journey of 1,000 miles starts with a single step, not a massive leap!

**Good luck!**

*“Every journey of 1,000 miles starts with a single step . . .”*