

Term kaizen



“ Kaizen” may be a Japanese term, but Masaaki Imai’s book, *Kaizen: the Key to Japan’s Competitive Success* (“ Kaizen”) became such an international bestseller that the term eventually made its way into the English-language business lexicon (Goff, 1998, p. 100; Imai, 1997, p. 1). “ Kaizen” means continuous improvement and in the context of Japanese business management, the term implies everyone on the corporate ladder, from the CEO to rank-and-file workers, taking low-cost common-sense approaches to bring about incremental improvements (Imai, 1997, pp. 1-2).

Building on *Kaizen*, Imai’s latest book, *Gemba Kaizen: the Common-sense Approach to Business Management* (“ Gemba Kaizen”), focuses on applying kaizen to Gemba - which is “ the real place” where businesses develop, produce and sell goods and services. In *Gemba Kaizen* Gemba specifically refers to the manufacturing floor (Goff, 1998, p. 100; Caswell, 1998, p. 42). This paper provides a summary of the contents of and a critique of *Gemba Kaizen*. It argues that kaizen is a set management principle that will have a positive impact on improving quality in the workplace. In this sense, Gemba kaizen, if properly practiced will be beneficial to a company’s bottom line.

In *Gemba Kaizen*, Imai, who is the founder and chairman of the Kaizen Institute (Cork, 2001, p. 37), encourages managers to use kaizen techniques in the Gemba because he believes that applying kaizen will improve a company’s performance in the key pillars of business performance - quality, cost and delivery (QCD) (Caswell, 1998, p. 42). The leader of the kaizen movement explains that practicing kaizen at the Gemba is the key to a company’s competitive success and revenue generation. Throughout the book, he reiterates the idea that Gemba improvement is a low-cost way to

improve quality, reduce costs and exceed customer expectations without the need for expensive investment on breakthrough technology (Caswell, 1998, p. 42).

In order to realize QCD, Imai recommends implementing three kaizen activities, namely, standardization of procedures, the five Ss of housekeeping and the elimination of Muda - which in plain English is waste (Imai, 1997, p. 20). The drill of standardization is to establish a standard, maintain it, then improve on it (Imai, 1997, pp. 51-53; Wittenberg, 1994, p. 12). By standards, Imai means a set of directives and procedures that management establishes as guidelines for employees to carry out major operations successfully (Imai, 1997, pp. 53-54; Wittenberg, 1994, p. 12).

The next building block of kaizen is the five Ss of housekeeping. Although derived from Japanese words, the five Ss have been given English counterparts. The five Ss are:

- Seiri (sort) - separate out unnecessary items from the necessary ones in the Gemba and discard the former.
- Seiton (straighten) - arrange all necessary items in an orderly manner.
- Seiso (scrub) - keep machines and working environments clean.
- Seiketsu (systematize) - extend the concept of cleanliness to oneself and ensure that the above three steps become routine practices.
- Shitsuke (standardize) - establish standards for the previous four steps to ensure that they are constantly being carried out (Imai, 1997, pp. 64-65; Sheridan, 1997, p. 28).

Finally, kaizen turns attention to the elimination of Muda. Muda refers to any activity that does not add value and it can be categorized into seven <https://assignbuster.com/term-kaizen/>

classes. They are made of over-production, waiting, transportation, processing, inventory, motion and repairing. To better comprehend the concept of muda, one can turn to Imai's explanation of what the muda of overproduction is. As Imai explains, some line supervisors are worried about machine failures, rejects and other problems that may prevent them from meeting their targets within the schedule, therefore they feel compelled to produce more than necessary. However, the just-in-time (JIT) concepts argue that this is worse than producing behind schedule because producing more results in waste, gives people a false sense of security and covers up problems in Gemba. This, in short, is the muda of over-production (Imai, 1997, pp. 75-81) .

From the above summary of Gemba Kaizen, one can see a clear link between the concept of kaizen and the improvement of a company's performance in QCD. The three hallmarks of kaizen - namely, standardization, good housekeeping and removal of muda - are designed to bring about a clean and orderly workplace and work habits based on creating and maintaining fixed standards and eliminating " anything that does not add value" (Goff, 1998, p. 100). The next question is, the clear link between kaizen and QCD, notwithstanding, will kaizen principles actually bring about improvement in quality and efficiency?

If kaizen principles are properly implemented, arguably, quality improvement and an increase in efficiency can be expected for two reasons. First, kaizen is a simple, common-sense approach that teaches companies how to work smart instead of work hard. For instance, to eliminate the muda of motion, Imai recommends, amongst others, reducing the distance between operators

and the machines they work on and placing supply boxes closer to the operators so that they can pick up a piece of material and feed it directly into the machine. It is quite obvious that this not only makes the task of operators easier but also reduces production time. Second, kaizen, with its emphasis on ideas like JIT and eliminating muda is about making full use of existing resources (Hamisah, 2000, p. 4). Surely, making full use of existing resources will have a positive impact on QCD.

To further test if kaizen techniques are indeed useful to improving quality, one can use the principles of lean management as a benchmark for assessing the kaizen concept. Lean management is an approach developed by Toyota 50 years ago. Using the tenets of lean management, Toyota manufactured cars of good quality with half the manpower, half the manufacturing space and half the capital invested as compared with other car manufacturers. Judiciously following lean principles, other large businesses like Boeing reaped major savings (Page, 2005, pp. 26-27). Given the success of lean management, if the kaizen concept espouses techniques similar to those used in a lean management system, one can argue that kaizen does indeed have a potentially positive impact on QCD.

The directives of lean management are simple: cut waste, make work easier, and simplify systems. Despite the difference in lingo, it is hard to not see these features as mirror reflections of kaizen techniques. Consider this: cutting waste is but a linguistic variance of eliminating muda, making work easier is akin to good housekeeping while simplifying systems echoes with kaizen's encouragement of low-cost improvements to the gemba in place of disruptive and expensive re-engineering. In other words, lean management

can function as an appropriate euphemism for the kaizen concept. Given the fact that the two management philosophies employ techniques that are so similar and that lean management has proven its worth in the practical world of business operations, it is not hard to conclude that Imai's simplistic approach of kaizen in the gemba is potentially useful to anyone who is practicing quality.

In the final analysis, whether assessing the theory of kaizen on its own merits or by analogy to lean management principles, kaizen appears capable of positively affecting QCD in the production sector. In this regard, it is well worth companies who are mindful of maintaining their competitive edge to consider implementing kaizen in their gemba.

Reference List

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