

# PASSPORT

## K a i z e n : K a Z a m !

Kaizen rises again:  
the magical,  
practical power  
of small  
improvements.

By Norman Bodek

Illustration by Tony Stone Images

At one time, Japanese businesspeople came to America, took photos of U.S. offices, and returned home to create office spaces identical to the ones they'd photographed. During my visit to the Japan Management Association's office in Tokyo, I was told that its office space was an exact replica of the American Management Association office in New York City—the same room sizes, the same blackboards, even the same chairs.

But Japan has transformed itself

from imitator to innovator, and I attribute that change to one word: *kaizen*. Kaizen is a Japanese word that means continuous improvement—that is, always being on the lookout for better and simpler ways of working.

As a workplace concept, kaizen first appeared in the late 1980s, but it is experiencing a resurgence due to its commonsense approach to work. The goal of kaizen is to involve every employee in thinking up small improvement

ideas on a regular basis. Small ideas, when implemented, can make work easier and more enjoyable. The end result is a more energized company with improved quality and safety, reduced costs, and decreased lead-time.

On average, a Japanese company receives 24 improvement ideas in writing per employee each year. In contrast, U.S. companies receive on average less than one idea per employee per year. In the United Kingdom, the average is one idea every six years. Those statistics show that learning to think the kaizen way can generate amazing results.

Let's take a look at a few examples of kaizen at work.

- At the Haneda Airport in Tokyo, an employee painted a bright yellow arrow to show travelers which direction the luggage carousel moves. It was a helpful aid for anxious travelers.
- At Canon in Tokyo, a worker put wheels on a bucket so that employees could pass parts without having to go back and forth between workstations.
- At Nippon Steel, just outside of Tokyo in Kimitsu, Japan, steel moves along a conveyer belt. When the steel leaves an oven, a door opens, tons of hot air are lost, and a great deal of energy is needed to reheat the oven. A worker shopping off duty noticed that when he entered a department store there was no door, only a curtain of hot air. He told his supervisor about it and got permission to install a curtain of hot air in the plant.
- In Wolverton, England, a number of employees at British Rail Maintenance Ltd. weren't using protective screens, which were big and cumbersome, while working with arc welds. Two employees noticed that workers who neglected to

use the screens were getting flash eye (temporary blindness caused by looking at the arc welding). Those employees developed a small portable screen that was more comfortable for welders to use.

- In Dartford, South London, employees at British Rail are issued a new uniform and new leather belt each year. One employee suggested that the belt be issued every other year and saved the company £10,000 (US\$15,000).

Bunji Tozawa, president of HR Association in Osaka, Japan, would tell you that

need new innovative ideas, but the average person doesn't come up with big ideas. Asking people to think of big cost-saving ideas tends to inhibit them from suggesting smaller improvements that could make their jobs easier—and save the company money.

**Have realistic constraints.** Many leaders believe they don't have time to install a new process. Tozawa responds, "If you don't have enough money, then do kaizen; if you don't have enough time, then do kaizen."

You may already be practicing kaizen and not realize it. When you have a problem, do you a) try to tackle it whole thing or b) divide the problem into small manageable pieces? Do you try to fix the problem a) perfectly from the beginning or b) make little improvements along the way? Do you a) never stray from the work procedures you've been taught or b) think of alternative methods for

getting work done? If you answered "b" to those questions, kaizen is something you already practice; you just need to fine-tune it.

The simplicity of kaizen can make it hard to accept as a management theory. Most of us are conditioned to think that effective change has to be painful. But the kaizen philosophy can teach you that you can achieve enormous benefits when you improve bit by bit.

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Quick and Easy Kaizen	
Before Improvement	After Improvement
The Effect:	
Date:	Name:

the benefits those companies incurred were thanks to employees thinking the kaizen way. Tozawa teaches a course called Quick and Easy Kaizen. For more than 10 years, he has been teaching 120 three-hour seminars a year. Tozawa offers these tips on using kaizen.

**Change the method.** After implementing an idea, don't go back to the old way of doing things. For example, if your desk is messy and you clean it up, you aren't practicing kaizen because you can easily go back and mess up your desk again. If, however, you install a method that forces you to file things away, forward them on to the appropriate person, or discard them immediately, then you're practicing kaizen.

**Focus on small changes.** Companies