



Kaizen in different cultural environments

For the past decade or longer, kaizen has received widespread attention worldwide in a variety of fields. In the original Japanese, “kaizen” is written in two characters: 改善. The first character means “change” while the second means “better,” and therefore the combination literally implies “improvement” or “change for the better.”

Kaizen, however, goes beyond simple improvement. Currently “process kaizen” is the goal of many organizations. Process kaizen involves generating and implementing ideas to accomplish the objectives of work in better ways. Typically there can be a multitude of ways to complete a task. When seeking to improve task completion, major, medium, and minor changes may be identified. A major change usually requires a significant investment in R&D activities and is popularly known as “innovation.” A medium change may be an improvement activity carried out by a small group. A minor change may be incremental improvements made at the individual level. In general, undertaking a major change is a more challenging and costly method to achieve the objective compared with a minor change, and it should be remembered that successful kaizen is not necessarily reliant on financial investment. The objective of kaizen, however, is not cost reduction. It simply makes work simpler, faster, more comfortable, and more efficient. The key to kaizen is a constant flow of ideas to promote improvement.

Kaizen is practiced differently in each environment or country, as nationality, politics, history, religion, culture, language, infrastructure, living environment, education, diet, climate, and business customs play a significant role, not only in how improvements are made but also in the elements that need to be improved. Therefore the kaizen concepts in one country



may appear radically innovative to some observers or exotic to others.

Kaizen examples submitted by Waseda Business School students

Many international students study at Waseda Business School (WBS) in Tokyo. As part of the introduction to Japanese technology, the concept of kaizen is one subject covered in the WBS graduate curriculum. The following examples of kaizen were submitted by international WBS graduate students, some of which are applicable in most countries and others more specific to a single environment.

Kaizen 1: When parking a car in a garage, drivers often hit the staircase leading to a different level because it was outside their line of sight. Kaizen was needed so that drivers would become aware of the staircase and stop their cars before hitting it. A simple tennis ball was hung from the ceiling on a string at the appropriate distance from the stairs (Figure 1). When the tennis ball comes into contact with the windshield,

drivers trying to park know that it means “stop here.”

Kaizen 2: Coconut trees grow in abundance in Southeast Asian countries, and some reach heights of 10 m or more. The inexperienced may not know how to climb those trees to pick the useful and delicious coconuts. A simple kaizen solution devised long ago was to carve v-shaped cuts into the trunks of coconut trees, making the climbing process both easier and safer.

Kaizen 3: A student who worked at a tennis club in customer service noticed that whenever he collected tennis balls scattered around the court, he experienced back pain after too much bending and stooping. In a kaizen innovation, a basket for picking up tennis balls was designed. The innovative idea was the design at the bottom of the basket along with a long handle. Wires were placed parallel to two sides of the lower surface of the basket. The distance between the two wires was slightly narrower than the tennis ball diameter, so that when a ball was forced through the wires, they separated to allow the ball to pass through. Once the ball was through, the wires closed up and the ball remained in the basket.

Kaizen 4: In Japan, timers indicating the length of time before the signal will change to green are seen only at pedestrian crosswalks at busy intersections. However, in the Republic of China, IR Iran, and Malaysia, traffic signals with countdown timers are common for automotive traffic (Figure 2). The timers are placed below the stoplights so that they are clearly visible. In some cities in India, drivers stopped at a red light see the word “relax” in addition to the traditional red light. This kaizen addition allows traffic lights to play the dual role of regulating

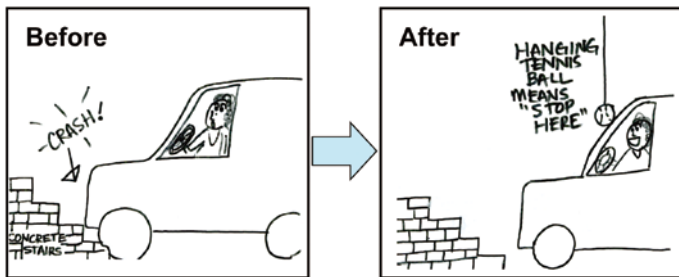


Figure 1. Parking guide (by Ginger Vaughn, USA).

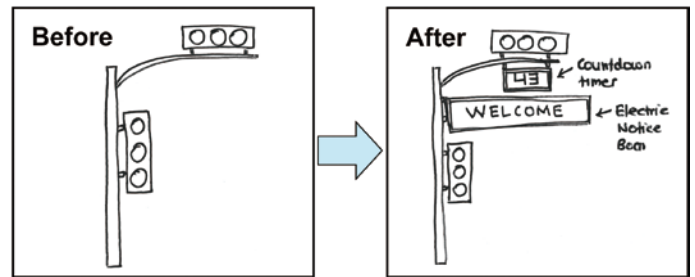



Figure 2. Countdown timer for traffic lights and electric notice board (by Ghazali Bin Hizam, Malaysia).

traffic flow and reminding drivers and pedestrians to relax, hopefully contributing to psychological health and higher productivity.

Kaizen 5: Mango trees are another welcome addition to the natural environment in many APO member countries which provide nutritious, delicious fruit for domestic consumption and for export markets. Picking mangoes from the higher branches is a specialized art, however. Long-handled gardening shears can detach the fruit, but a ripe mango that falls to the ground will be badly bruised, may be inedible, and certainly will not be accepted by discerning consumers. A simple preventive kaizen action utilizes a plastic bottle to ensure that mangos reach the table in all their glory.

This article presented the basic concept of kaizen. Basically, kaizen is a seemingly minor change or series of changes to make work easier, simpler, faster, and more efficient. Because kaizen efforts usually result in only minor changes, the cost required to implement them is insignificant in many cases. Therefore the essence of

kaizen is the ability to generate ideas without spending money. Kaizen is strongly recommended by productivity practitioners worldwide to improve working environments and is easily applicable to educational institutions and homes as well.

Part of this article was taken from a working paper by Dr. Fujita published by Waseda Research Center, WBS, January 2012. 

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