

# The Benefits of *Kaizen* and *Kaizen* Events

by **Anthony Manos**

**K***aizen* is a Japanese word typically translated to “continuous improvement.” Originally this word referred to subtle, gradual improvements that are made over time. A baseball analogy is hitting singles all game long to score runs.

The connotation of the word has morphed to also include quick or fast improvements, like *kaizen* events (also known as *kaizen* blitzes, quick *kaizens* or rapid improvement projects), which are big improvements that are made quickly. This is analogous to hitting a homerun in baseball.

Both *kaizen* and *kaizen* events produce results, like the singles and homeruns driving in runs on the baseball field. But *kaizens* occur far more often than *kaizen* events.

For many organizations today, *kaizen* and *kaizen* events are viewed differently than the traditional mode of improvements.<sup>1</sup> For example, it is very common—especially in North American organizations—to use *kaizen* to describe how management prioritizes huge, complex and whole-sale changes with the hope that vast improvement and profits will follow. Maybe you have heard management say things like:

- “If we just install the new production line, we can double output.”

- “We need an enterprisewide information knowledge system to solve all our inventory problems.”

These traditional approaches usually don’t produce the desired results. Often, organizations tend to overlook

## These simple lean tools require an organization’s serious commitment to continuous improvement.

the true power of *kaizen* or *kaizen* events. They want to hit the homerun, but instead strike out.

Maybe it’s part of our nature to want the big, dramatic improvement instead of the simple, steady improvement. This can occur for many reasons, including a manager wanting to make his mark on an organization to the “that’s the way we’ve always done it” attitude. See Table 1 for a summary of the differences between the two.

### Different Benefits

Always remember lean is easy, but getting people to change is difficult.

The tools of lean, such as *kaizen* and *kaizen* events, aren’t necessarily rocket science. Getting people to hold a philosophy of continuous improvement can sometimes prove challenging.

Lean is not the tools. Lean is in your head and heart. It’s how you approach your job, customers, suppliers and processes. Start as a lean learner, graduate to a lean achiever, which will lead you to become a lean thinker.

- **Lean learner:** Understand the basic concepts of lean (for example, lean 101, waste [*muda*], problem solving, change management, 5S and visual organization).
- **Lean achiever:** Apply the basic concepts to your organization and continue with more complex concepts of lean (for example, cellular flow, *kanban* and total productive maintenance [TPM]).
- **Lean thinker:** Naturally look at the situation from the lean perspective, moving beyond simply the tools.

There are several benefits to using *kaizen* or *kaizen* events.<sup>2</sup> These benefits can be categorized as either quantitative or qualitative. Unfortunately, too many managers focus solely on monetary benefits without considering people’s feelings, work styles or other intangible benefits derived from *kaizen* or *kaizen* events.

**Quantitative benefits.** These are measurable results used to show management specific improvements or prove that time, effort and money were well spent. Based on the *kaizen* or *kaizen* event, quantitative benefits might include:

- Money saved.
- Time saved (contributing to money saved).
- Shorter distance traveled.
- Fewer people required.
- Reduced lead time or cycle time.
- Value vs. nonvalue added content.
- Fewer steps in a process.
- Improved first pass yield.
- Reduced inventory.

**TABLE 1** *Kaizen*, *Kaizen* Events and Traditional Improvements

Type of improvement	<i>Kaizen</i>	<i>Kaizen</i> events	Traditional improvements
<b>Large or small scale improvements</b>	Small, steady improvements over time.	Big, fast, simple improvements in three to five days.	Dramatic, one-time, complex, technologically based.
<b>Who is affected</b>	Individuals or groups.	Team based.	Top-down approach.
<b>Costs</b>	Low cost.	Low cost.	High cost usually.
<b>Buy-in potential</b>	Good because employee(s) came up with the ideas.	Good because employee(s) came up with the ideas.	More difficult because users weren’t asked their opinion.
<b>Intended benefits</b>	Can be used for any benefit, including quality of work life.	Usually focused on reducing time or nonvalue added activities.	Meant to revolutionize an organization.

One of the tricks of the trade is to get an accountant on board to measure the results of the activities before closing a *kaizen* or *kaizen* event and eventually forward the metrics to management. I am always amazed and impressed to see how helpful accountants have been in this step. Also, this measurement step encourages management to become owners of the results.

**Qualitative benefits.** These types of “feeling” results that show the human side of lean might be just as important as the quantitative results. Predictably, these types of benefits are more difficult to measure.

For example, we might be able to quantify a 5S event’s outcome in terms of shorter distance traveled within a workplace, fewer safety incidents and reduced supplies or inventories. But few companies actually take the time to understand the human side of lean.

If you listen to participants at a successful lean event, you’ll hear things like: “Now I can find things around here,” or “These changes will help reduce my stress level,” or “Look how much more room we have.” These are important and lasting human results that are just as important as the measurable ones.

**Specific Kaizen Event Benefits**

There are three specific benefits to performing *kaizen* events rather than other improvement methods. The following *kaizen* event benefits are commonly overlooked by management:

1. **Time:** When is there ever really enough time to make improvements? One of the biggest reasons I recommend using a *kaizen* event as a method of improvement is that the time of the event is scheduled. If you wait until you have time to get a team together to make improvements, you’ll wait forever. By scheduling a *kaizen* event, you are being proactive and setting aside time to make improvements.<sup>3</sup>
2. **Teamwork:** Invariably, at the end of a *kaizen* event, someone mentions how much he or she enjoyed working as a team. This comment signals a shift in atti-

tude from the beginning of the event, when individuals might have worked alone. When people need help from other departments during a future event or activity and the people have already worked on a *kaizen* team, they are usually more than willing to contribute in any way possible. This attitude and outlook promote a lean culture.

3. **Proof:** To convince people lean does indeed work, many need to see proof. By seeing immediate results from a *kaizen* event, people will come to understand they have more control over their work areas than they think. Also, documenting activities allows us to track tangible benefits and improvements in the work areas.

**Caveat of Kaizen Events**

Some people disparage *kaizen* events. They don’t believe the calculated results, or they contend that the results cannot be sustained. I would agree with this only if the team falsified the results or the team did not standardize a process to make it a new, improved way.

If *kaizen* events are deemed to have failed for these reasons, I wouldn’t blame the team. I would look at the process or system and see what lessons could be learned to avoid these failures in the future.

Resistance to *kaizen* events might occur because one purpose of lean is to instill discipline into our organizations. If discipline is lacking, in many cases I look to management to see why an event is considered a failure. For instance, basic building blocks of lean—such as 5S or standardized work—can help build the discipline within an organization to perform more difficult lean concepts such as *kanban* or TPM.

During one 5S event, I mentioned this to a team. During a break, a team member told me the company already was using *kanban*. I asked, “How was it working?” She said, “Not so well.” Why? Because the company didn’t have the discipline in place to move the *kanban* cards correctly as needed. This caused problems.

I have performed more than 200

*kaizen* events during my quality career. In one way or another, each event has improved how each company has performed. It is not uncommon during a quick change event to cut the time in half on the very first try. For example, applying standardized work to an order entry process reduced the time for the task by one-third and made it easier to train new employees. A 5S event reduced the stress between departments by organizing and standardizing how paperwork was passed on.

Whether the company is able to sustain the gains is another story. To sustain the gains the company must:

- Standardize processes to the new, improved level.
- Train everyone involved to the new standard.
- Monitor the results over time.
- Secure commitment of management and assign ownership to maintain and improve the gains.

Companies can’t just schedule a *kaizen* event or slap the term *kaizen* on any project or activity and hope it turns around a business operation or function. *Kaizen* can’t just happen on its own, but must come from a company’s thoughtful, serious commitment to continuous improvement. *Kaizen* events might last just a few days, but *kaizen* doesn’t happen overnight.

It’s a change in the way of thinking, not just a change in process.

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