

Frontline Supervisor

MIIA
Employee
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Program

800.451.1834



This issue

The Quality Quotient: Continuity,
Commitment, Cost Effectiveness

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The Quality Quotient: Continuity, Commitment, Cost Effectiveness

In Frontline Supervisor's 2009 volume of four articles, "The Quality Quotient," we first explore Kaizen, an example of continuous improvement at work. Second, we take a look at the nature of improvement – how to get it done. Third, we ask how to maximize personal and professional energy. And finally, we probe the concept of synergy – what it is and how it works.

The Kaizen method originated in Japan following World War II, and was first introduced to the United States in the 1970's and 80's. The word Kaizen means "continuous improvement". It comes from the Japanese words "Kai" which means change and "Zen" which means good.

Although it has yet to be adopted on a wide scale in this country, it has many features that are immediately applicable to managers today. The key elements of Kaizen are: quality, effort, communication, involvement of all employees, and willingness to change.

Kaizen affects all levels of an organization and involves every employee every day. It is based on making little changes on a regular basis: always improving productivity, safety and effectiveness while reducing waste.

In that spirit, employees are encouraged to regularly come up with ideas that make small, incremental improvements. It is a continuous process, not a one-time brainstorming event. The results: higher employee morale, safety, and retention rates, and improvement in communication and teamwork throughout all levels of the organization.

Instead of our western philosophy, "if it ain't broken, don't fix it", the Kaizen method teaches, "do it better, make it better, improve it even if it isn't broken, because if we don't, we can't compete with those who do."

When this philosophy operates in a workplace, the relationship between managers and employees creates a learning environment. In a learning environment, managers ask their employees to identify and try to solve problems in a cooperative effort. They ask, "how can we improve our performance?" In this thoughtful environment it is understood that the process determines the quality of the product or service.

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What can managers do to apply the Kaizen method to their work groups?

In order for it to work, this method must become something your employees do because they want to, and because they know it is good for them and their organization. It will not be accepted if management mandates that it be done. It is therefore, imperative that you lead by example to get buy-in from your employees.

Example: Toyota's production process is known for Kaizen, where all line personnel are expected to stop their moving production line in the event of any abnormality and, along with their supervisor, suggest an improvement to resolve the abnormality. The main ideas in this process are:

- to think long term
- to have a process for solving problems
- to add value to the organization by developing its people
- to recognize that continuously solving root problems drives organizational learning

Because direct involvement by managers is critical, plan to spend several days at a job site working with your employees. See how the job gets done and encourage them to make suggestions for improvement. Once they make suggestions, it is up to you to act on those suggestions so that employees see the changes being made quickly.

Keep in mind that Kaizen is about action. Taking action to generate suggestions and taking action to implement those suggestions is the key to total quality improvement with dedicated employees.

