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Foolproof Kaizen

Increase your chance of success



The Kaizen Event Planner
*Achieving rapid improvement
 in office, service, and
 technical environments*
 By Karen Martin and
 Mike Osterling
 Publisher: Productivity
 Press
 2007, 240 pages

You can research on the Web, read books, and learn as much as you possibly can about running a kaizen event. But, when push comes to shove, the real impact of a kaizen event depends on its implementation. Academic theory is one thing; the proper execution of the event is something else altogether. For those people who have to plan and execute a kaizen event, authors Karen Martin and Mike Osterling provide a step-by-step method that makes the process almost foolproof.

The Kaizen Event Planner is the result of hours of work and experience running kaizen events. The authors are consultants, professors, and former practitioners, who understand how to make a kaizen event successful. The experience shows in charts, graphs, and worksheets that can be used to guide the reader through the planning, execution, and post-event follow-up. An added bonus is the CD-ROM, which contains a set of interactive, Excel-based tools. Sample documents include current- and future-state value stream maps, a list of kaizen commandments, and a lean terminology reference guide. These tools, along with instructions and ideas, provide an effective tool kit for someone tackling a kaizen event.

The book is divided into four distinct, but related, sections. The first section contains foundational information to set the context for a kaizen event. The two chapters in this section discuss lean enterprise principles and the characteristics of kaizen.

I particularly like how the authors define the word kaizen at the beginning of chapter two: “Kaizen is a Japanese word that, loosely translated, means to take apart (*kai* = change) and put together in a better way (*zen* = good).” This particular framing of the definition helps put kaizen events into the proper context for the reader.

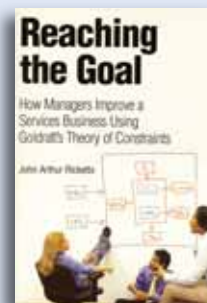
The next section of the book—comprised of seven chapters—is focused on planning the event. It might seem like a lot of information, but the planning process is one of the most important elements, and the detail will help users avoid unnecessary mistakes. I particularly like the description of the facilitator roles and the detail provided in the workshop, showing each role and the associated responsibilities.

The largest section of the book focuses on carrying out the kaizen event. This section introduces a process mapping technique the authors refer to as “metrics-based process mapping.” It combines the metric components from value stream mapping with the structure of functional process maps. This helps team members dive deeper within a process, which results in an accurate and thorough, current-state analysis.

The book concludes with a discussion of sustaining the results of a kaizen event and creating a kaizen culture within an organization. The authors accomplish this by describing the change process, illustrating how to show leadership commitment and

explaining how to establish a continuous-improvement infrastructure.

While this book will not give you a rich theoretical understanding of kaizen, it will give you confidence that, if you follow the planning, execution, and follow-up activities outlined by the authors, you will be successful. If you are in charge of conducting a kaizen event, this book and CD can substantially reduce your learning curve and increase your chance for success.



Reaching the Goal
*How managers improve a
 services business using
 Goldratt's theory of
 constraints*
 By John Arthur Ricketts
 Publisher: IBM Press
 2008, 400 pages

The service industry is focused on people. They provide the raw materials and the finished product that make the service experience exceptional or dismal. In many cases, people are an uncontrolled variable that seem to derail or accelerate business process in seemingly strange and unpredictable ways.

Business managers and executives go crazy as they carefully try to measure inputs and outputs based on the services employees provide to their customers. If only there were ways to optimize the right portions of service while maximizing throughput—without additional complexity or complication.

Enter John Arthur Ricketts, who takes the same approach to managing a bottleneck on the shop

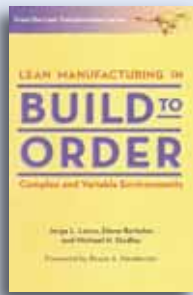
floor as managing an employee who is providing a service. The authors sum up the approach when they write about Eli Goldratt, who developed the theory of constraints. Ricketts writes, "Eli believes that we are still at a very early stage in the development of our understanding of how businesses operate and that we can truly move to a point where our understanding of business will have the same rigor as the hard sciences." This is a goal Fredrick Taylor pursued with vigor as he tried to develop the discipline of scientific management.

To help organization leaders achieve their goals, Ricketts, a distinguished engineer from IBM, has developed a comprehensive book explaining how to apply the theory of constraints to a service organization. The book is divided into three parts. The first is the "foundations" section, which describes the rise of the service industry; defines the theory of constraints; compares professional, scientific, and technical services with manufacturing-based industry; and reveals the organizational information about the book.

Part two of the book is on applications, which explains how to apply the theory of constraints to professional, scientific, and technical services. This part focuses on the management of resources, projects, and processes.

The third part of the book concentrates on implementation of the ideas. Ricketts describes the diffusion of innovations, managing contracts, developing systems, and creating continuous improvement within a services organization.

If your organization delivers any type of service to its customers, you'll find this book an enlightening and comprehensive read. It may go a little overboard in terms of how easy it is to deal with people—and I would have liked to have seen more on the training aspect of removing constraints—but the fundamental ideas will help you streamline service operations. You can help your company deliver a profitable service with the precision of Taylor's dream.



Lean Manufacturing in Build to Order, Complex, and Variable Environments

By Jorge L. Larco,
Elena Bortolan, and
Michael H. Studley
Publisher: Oaklea Press
2008, 192 pages

In a world with almost endless customization, the customer is king, while the beleaguered manufacturing organization suffers as it tries to cost effectively produce every single product any customer could ever want in the shortest time possible. It is enough to drive a general manager crazy.

To address this problem, the authors have created a book to showcase a number of practical approaches to implementing the concepts of lean manufacturing in a highly variable, engineered-to-order environment—an environment with managers who traditionally have shied away from the concepts of lean because of its inherent complexities and variability.

The first chapter provides a glimpse of what a lean organization in a build-to-order, complex assembly environment looks like. It describes safety, order, and cleanliness as attributes, as well as a Just-in-Time production focus combined with kanban, six sigma quality, and an empowered workforce.


The rest of the book describes issues of layout and factory design, scheduling and support, the build-to-order environment, how to bring about change, measuring the lean transformation, and key factors for lean success.

In one of the more interesting portions of the book, the authors describe the flowing of people through the production process rather than the flow of product. Some items, such as a house, ship engine, or commercial refrigeration unit, require people to flow around the unit rather than the unit moving from workstation to workstation.

The authors describe how one of the most common problems in such a situation results when materials are not available when they are needed. A by-product of not having the necessary material is that workers tend to cannibalize materials designated for another phase of the project or product for their own phase.

To remedy such a problem and to provide better flow visibility, the authors suggest creating a visual method of showing the flow of materials and personnel. They suggest that, when an activity is completed, it is colored in on a chart. When the next crew members arrive, they can see exactly what has been done and what still needs to be completed. As the authors indicate, the concept of people flow is important in large scale build-to-order environments and requires specific attention.

The final chapter of the book provides an explanation of the five factors of success the authors have encountered when transforming a build-to-order environment into a lean, build-to-order environment. Factors include having a strategic vision, cultivating strong line leadership, providing expert training and support to the personnel undergoing the transformation, creating aggressive performance targets, and impatience. The last is the most interesting and compelling. As the authors state, "The primary (top) team in an organization should demonstrate impatience by regularly reviewing progress, and make it known that they know where things stand ... If you move too slowly in transforming to lean, valuable momentum and enthusiasm can be lost."

If you are impatient about transforming your own build-to-order organization into a lean organization, pick up this book. It can provide you with a little nudge and some ideas to begin your journey toward lean. 

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