



**Kaizen Events:
Achieving Rapid and Dramatic Improvement through Focused Attention
and Team-Based Solutions***

by Karen Martin, President

Introduction

Kaizen is a management philosophy originally developed by Toyota to foster continuous improvement within its highly successful business model, the Toyota Production System (TPS), which has served as the foundation for what we refer to as Lean management in the United States. While TPS was borne from Taiichi Ohno's study of Henry Ford's production process and U.S. grocery stores and guidance from noted quality expert W. Edwards Deming, the Kaizen approach to operating a business is uniquely Japanese.

The word Kaizen, which is loosely defined as *improvement for the better*, is derived from two Chinese root words, "kai," which means *to change or break apart* and "zen," which means *goodness or betterment*. Kaizen Events—also referred to as Kaizen Blitzes, Kaizen Workshops, and Rapid Improvement Events—are two- to five-day focused events during which a cross-functional team studies a process or work environment to identify waste and implements improvements to eliminate the root cause of the waste, generating rapid and often far more dramatic results than those typically obtained from traditional improvement methods. While originally embraced by manufacturing, Kaizen Events are now being used by industries of all types, including healthcare, and in organizations of all sizes to implement rapid change.

Kaizen Events provide an excellent return on investment, in terms of both money and people. A properly planned and executed event typically provides measurable improvements ranging from 30-80% in one or more of the following six aspects of organizational performance:

- Faster throughput/turnaround times
- Higher quality
- Freed capacity
- Greater customer satisfaction
- Greater workforce satisfaction
- Reduced costs (in non-labor-related, cost-intensive processes)
- Increased revenue/improved cash flow

Kaizen Events are remarkably effective in producing rapid dramatic results because they rely on:

- Small work teams
- Focused attention on a problem
- Input from all functions involved with or touched by the process
- Rapid decisions and implementation (including innovative training methods)
- Leadership buy-in

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Another advantage of Kaizen Events is that they are typically structured as low-cost activities. The phrase “creativity before capital” describes the spirit of a Kaizen Event, where the Kaizen Team is chartered with a measurable objective to eliminate process waste without spending much, if any, money. This model holds several advantages over the all-too-common occurrence where organizations prematurely jump to costly solutions, such as automation and staffing, to solve a process problem before they’ve eliminated the fundamental waste that’s causing the problem. In cases like these, organizations are left with a faster, unsound process and a budget bleeding from ill-spent resources.

The organizational impact and magnitude of results achieved from a Kaizen Event is dependent on several keys to success:

- Leadership commitment
- Workforce communication/education about the approach
- Proper scoping; selection of the process to be improved
- Kaizen Team composition
- Event planning
- Event execution
- Event follow-up

Leadership Commitment

Holding a successful Kaizen Event begins with leadership commitment. Leaders must have a basic understanding of the Lean approach to continuous improvement, buy-in to the philosophy and commitment to make themselves and resources from across the *entire* value stream available to the Kaizen Team as needed.

For a successful Kaizen Event, the team members must be 100% dedicated to the Event, sequestered from their daily work. Back-ups must be put in place for team members who carry out important functions that can’t be placed on hold for the duration of the Event. The structured degree of focus and team commitment is one reason why Kaizen Events are so effective.

The team must also be empowered to make its own decisions – after, of course, consulting with appropriate resources, considering legal and regulatory issues, etc. To help the leadership gain comfort with this arrangement, the Kaizen Team typically holds several briefings throughout the Event with the executive sponsor and the leaders of the upstream and downstream areas that will be impacted by the change. These meetings enable the leadership to ask the “what if’s” associated with the proposed process changes and provides the Kaizen Team the opportunity to educate the leadership on process discoveries and reasons for the proposed changes.

Workforce Communication/Education about the Process

Holding regular Kaizen Events creates a cultural shift in organizations whereby implementing rapid change becomes the way the organization operates on a daily basis. But in the transition period between operating the traditional way and embracing the Kaizen approach, the workforce needs to be adequately prepared for Kaizen Events.

At a minimum, five elements need to be communicated broadly:

- Why the organization is pursuing change (problem definition)
- What the organization expects to gain (anticipated benefits and results)
- How a Kaizen Event is structured
- How the workforce will be affected
- To whom they should direct ideas and questions

The most effective way to educate the workforce on the Kaizen Events is to provide training on the Lean Management/Lean Healthcare approach to continuous improvement, particularly if the training includes a simulation that clearly illustrates the benefits. The more the workforce understands the approach, the more support the organization will receive for its efforts. Greater support for the approach yields greater organizational results.

Before each Kaizen Event, a communication should go out to the workforce who will be affected by change letting them know which process is being improved, soliciting ideas for change, and asking that they do whatever it takes to assist the Kaizen Team should they ask for help. The rapid and intense nature of Kaizen Events requires this level of input and teamwork from all involved.

Selecting a Process for Rapid Improvement

Not all processes are good candidates for Kaizen Events, but most are. The essential trait is that the process is narrow enough in scope to allow adequate measurement of the current state and improvement within a short time frame. Even with proper scoping, a process selected for improvement may need to be even more narrowly defined after the Event begins. The Kaizen philosophy is two-fold: 1) incremental improvements often lead to quantum results, and 2) if you wait for the perfect time to improve a complex process, it'll never get improved.

It's best if the organization has drawn a Value Stream Map for each of its product/service families (i.e. ED, OB, med-surg, psych, etc.) because the VSM provides the visual means for determining the greatest obstacles to flow for the organization. The VSM then serves as the strategic planning tool for prioritizing process improvements and planning Kaizen Events.

Selecting the Kaizen Team

A Kaizen Team is comprised of six to eight core team members, and *never more than 10*. Additional staff serving as process consultants and subject matter experts may be brought in as needed, but only at the team's request. Core team members must include a representative sample of *the people who actually do the work*, as they are the ones who know best how to improve the process. Management may be included on the team, but only if they serve as active members and view their role as equal to any other team member. Within a Kaizen Team, rank has no privilege and there is no veto power from outside the team. For the greatest degree of success, the team should also include at least one pair of "outside eyes" to contribute objectivity to the targeted process. Selecting the core team is potentially the most important Event planning activity. Careful consideration of team candidates will ensure that no

function involved in or touched by the process is left out and that the team consists of people who are both independent thinkers and team players.

Pre-Event Activities

Creating the Kaizen Charter is the most critical of the planning activities associated with a Kaizen Event. The Charter, which serves the blueprint for the Event, includes:

- The problem being addressed
- The process being improved (often listed in terms of which process blocks from a value stream or process-level map are being studied and improved)
- Kaizen Team members
- Additional resources that will be needed (people, supplies, limited budget)
- Date, time and location
- Measurable objectives
- Boundaries/limitations (what the team is *not* authorized to change)

Executing the Event

Kaizen Events typically last two to five days. If the selected process has already been mapped at a micro level, the Event can be shorter and focus on prioritizing and implementing improvements. But for most Kaizen Events, mapping the process is part of the current state discovery phase that kicks off a five-day Event. Since Lean in general, and Kaizen Events specifically, often focus on eliminating waste to reduce throughput/turnaround time and improve quality, it's critical that the process-level map include time and quality-oriented metrics.

After the process-level map is drawn that reflects the current state, the creative part of the Kaizen Event kicks in – brainstorming about potential improvements. Creating a prioritization grid can be helpful in determining which improvement ideas will be easiest to implement and will yield the greatest benefit.

Once the improvements are selected, they are designed, tested, and implemented – *rapidly*. The most important part of the implementation phase is training workers on how to execute the new process. Given the short timeframes of most Kaizen Events, innovative training solutions are often needed, especially when a large workforce and/or shift work is involved. Training occurs *during the course of the event* because the day after the Event concludes, the process is performed the new way *across the board*. Ideally, the Kaizen team implements the improved process early enough in the event to allow time to observe the new process so necessary adjustments can be implemented within the scope of the event. This isn't always possible for administrative processes. In these cases, the team must at least test the improved process by performing a walk-through.

Creating a "30-day list" is the final step in Event execution. The 30-day list lists any additional activities that must be completed to sustain the change and includes who's accountable and the deadline for completion. This list should be short and within the scope of the Kaizen Event.

A team celebration (preferably of their choice) typically concludes the Event. Due to the intensity of the Event and the camaraderie that's established during the Event, it's important to celebrate the team's success. Kaizen Events are very hard work, but they should also contain an element of fun.

Post-Event Activities

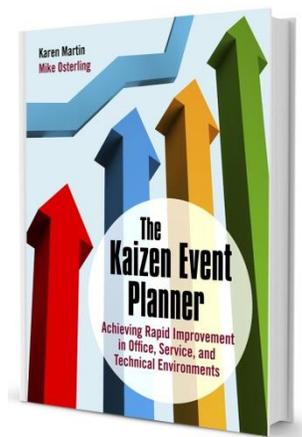
To spread enthusiasm for the Kaizen approach organization-wide, communicating the team's success is vital. When employees experience directly or learn through communication how quickly change can occur compared to how the organization may have operated traditionally, it generates the enthusiasm and support needed for future events.

However, sustaining change and continuing to reap the benefits of improvements are two of the greatest challenges in any change effort. For this reason, 30- and either 60- or 90-day audits are recommended to assess how the process performs as compared to the Event's stated objectives and the future state predictions the Team makes during the Event. In addition, the 30-day list must be managed to assure that the final activities necessary for a sustainable change have been completed.

And then it starts all over again...Kaizen is about *continuous* improvement.

Summary

The power of generating rapid and dramatic improvements through Kaizen Events results from the focused attention and cross-functional teamwork that defines the Kaizen approach. Gone are the days in which management, management engineers, or outside consultants dictated how a job should be performed or a process improved. Gone are the days of establishing process improvement teams that spent weeks, months or years studying a process problem and recommending improvements that were never implemented. Kaizen Events offer a proven method for generating the rapid, dramatic and sustainable results that the current healthcare marketplace demands.



For more information, please visit www.ksmartin.com/TKEP.

You may also be interested in Karen's other books: www.ksmartin.com/books-products, including the Shingo Award-winning [The Outstanding Organization](#) and the newly released [Value Stream Mapping](#).