



10 Things to Avoid During a Kaizen

Kaizen is the Japanese name for continuous improvement. While Kaizen is really about improvement involving everyone everyday it is often associated with a structured event. Kaizen events fill the gap between individual, very local improvement initiatives and bigger initiatives such as value stream improvement. They are essential to get cross-functional and multi-level teams involved in a Lean transformation. In that respect, kaizen events have a dual role – to make improvements but also to teach and communicate.

In order for a kaizen to be successful it requires a great deal of both preparation and follow-up. Here are 10 things I have learned over the years to avoid during a kaizen:

1. Lack of a charter

A charter is used to establish the framework of the kaizen. It determines what the problem statement is, relevant background information, time frame, team members, some estimation of the resources involved, and how the improvement will be measured. Without a charter the kaizen could take a very different direction.

2. Lack of identification of critical success factors

In order to make the kaizen successful you need to identify what elements are critical to the process. You must determine how you will measure the success of this kaizen so you know if your countermeasures are effective. Without measurement the kaizen can go on and on.

3. Scope is too large

The size or amount you will tackle within the kaizen is important for getting things done. If the scope is too large you run the problem of never implementing an improvement.

4. Kaizen event not linked business plan

You want to do kaizens that will help you meet your organization's goals. It can be wasteful to improve processes that are not part of the plan since resources to perform kaizens are limited.

5. Poor team selection

The team members on the kaizen are the brain power and manpower behind the improvement. Picking the team members should be an important part of planning the kaizen. You need to consider people's skill sets, expertise or knowledge, individuals within and outside the process, and who will provide the learning.

6. Striving for perfection

If you try to achieve perfection you may well be at the kaizen a very long time. Perfection is elusive. If you can accomplish 80% of what you set out to and meet the goals of the charter then call it complete. You will be back to improve from this new state again.

7. Poor follow through

In some kaizens it can be difficult to complete all the items you want within the time frame of the kaizen. Failure to follow through on these can undermine the team's efforts. It is also necessary to ensure the improvements that are made are maintained to prevent backsliding.

8. Not presenting results

Failure to present the results after the kaizen can cause the team to feel unappreciated. It also restricts learning throughout the organization. Another area can have a similar situation that can benefit from knowing how this team solved the problem.

9. Lack of visibility for non-participants

Getting the buy in from those who are not participating on the team is important for sustaining the improvement. When you are part of team you are involved in the solution. For those who are not we need to make them aware of the improvements the team is making. If you don't they will naturally resist the improvement.

10. Lack of management commitment

Management must not just support the kaizen but actively participate. Kaizens are as much a learning opportunity as anything else in the organization. Management must ensure the team has everything they need to be successful and when they are management must recognize the accomplishment.

Learning what not to do is as equally important as learning what to do. Don't make any of these mistakes on your kaizen and it will be a success. From your experience what advice would you give others to be successful at kaizen?

The Characteristics of a Lean Enterprise

While Lean can be beneficially applied to any process within an organization, its greatest benefit comes when it is applied across the enterprise. In *The Machine That Changed the World* in 1990, Jim Womack, et al., emphasized "that Lean thinking can be applied by any company anywhere in the world but that the full power of the system is only realized when it is applied to all elements of the enterprise."

Over time, it can be said that an organization that implements Lean becomes a Lean Enterprise. While there is no precise definition of a Lean Enterprise, I believe those organizations share common characteristics. A Lean Enterprise can be defined by these 15 characteristics:

1. **Customer Focus** - The external customer is both the starting point and ending point. Maximize value to the customer. Optimize not around internal operations, but around the customer. Seek to understand not only the customer's requirements but also their expectations of quality, delivery, and price.
2. **Purpose** - The purpose of an organization encompasses your vision (where you want to go), your mission (what you do), and your strategies (how you do it). Focus on purpose, not tools.
3. **Organizational Alignment** - You want people to understand their purpose, not just their job description or the tasks that are assigned to them. All the people involved need to have a common understanding of the organization's purpose, and practical understanding of the consequences of failure and the benefits of success.
4. **Knowledge** – People are the engine of the company, so it is vital to build knowledge and share it. This includes explicit knowledge (like that from books) as well as tacit knowledge, involving soft skills. Knowledge is built through the scientific method of PDCA.
5. **Questioning** - Encourage a questioning culture. Ask why several times to try to get to the root cause. Encourage everyone to question. "Seek first to understand, then to be understood," said Stephen Covey.
6. **Humility** - The more you strive for Lean, the more you realize how little you know, and how much there is

- yet to learn. Learning begins with humility
7. **Trust** – Build confidence in your promises and commitments. Building trust takes time.
 8. **Empowered employees** - Give frontline employees the first opportunity to solve problems. All employees should share in the responsibility for success and failure.
 9. **Flexible workforce** - As the Greek philosopher Heraclitus once said "The only constant is change." Flexibility is the ability to react to changes in customer demand. The key to success is to maintain redundancy and hence flexibility within the core competency.
 10. **Partnership** - Use teams, not individuals, internally between functions and externally with suppliers. Employees are partners too. As Covey says, "You must find a win-win, never win-lose, solution and if you can't you should walk away."
 11. **Simplicity** - Lean is not simple, but simplicity pervades. Simplicity is best achieved through the avoidance of complexity, than by 'rationalization' exercises.
 12. **Process** - Organize and think by end-to-end process. Think horizontal, not vertical. Concentrate on the way the product moves, not on the way the machines, people, or customers move.
 13. **Improvement** - Continuous improvement is everyone's concern. Improvement should go beyond incremental waste reduction to include innovation breakthrough.
 14. **Prevention** - Seek to prevent problems and waste, rather than to inspect and fix. Shift the emphasis from failure and appraisal to prevention. Inspecting the process, not the product, is prevention. Use poka yoke to mistake proof process errors.

15. **Visualization** – Visuals translate performance of every process into expected versus actual, throughout the management systems. It is regular, frequent, and factual data driven. Visuals provide the opportunity to quickly spot and take action at the earliest point that performance has not met what was expected.

A Lean Enterprise is not created quickly. When a business applies lean thinking, culture, and methods throughout the entire organization and beyond its four walls to customers and suppliers a Lean Enterprise is formed.

Lean Do's and Don'ts



Implementing Lean, or any change initiative is difficult. If it wasn't, everyone would be doing it, and they're not. Lean is not easy. It's not easy to understand. It's not easy to implement. And it's especially not easy to sustain. But anyone who has embarked on a so-called lean journey already knows this. Lean, in fact, is hard work and it's a challenge to keep it going.

The following list of do's and don'ts is aimed at focusing on the right things.

Do have an implementation strategy. Companies must determine ahead of time what the vision and direction will be. A proper strategy must assign clear responsibilities and show what resources are to be committed. Metrics and timelines must be defined. Management must decide what core elements are to be deployed and the

order of deployment. They also must determine where to start and how Lean will expand throughout the operation. Finally, the strategy should anticipate problem and recovery scenarios. This is critical. Companies can fail by attempting too much. They also can fail by attempting too little and assigning the initiative to a "backburner" status.

Do find a Lean coach. A Lean coach brings a range of experiences from previous Implementations that can help you to ensure that your implementation will be smooth and efficient. A good Lean coach should be continuously pushing your company.

Do develop a value stream map to differentiate the value added steps of a process from the non-value added steps, sum the time for each individual step and determine how much time is given to a process.

Do engage employees in transformation. Employee participation in project decision making is a main principle affecting innovation, productivity, and work satisfaction. Workers typically have more complete knowledge of their work than does management; hence, if workers participate in decision making, decisions will be made with better pools of information.

Don't focus on too Implementation. Tools do not solve problem but rather people do. It is not about the tools it's how they are applied. A large number of organizations have failed to produce the desired results from the direct and prescriptive application of Lean tools. The tools themselves have been proven to work in many situations. The difference must then be in how the tools were applied, their appropriateness, but not the tools themselves.

Don't optimize a bad process. Ensure current and future processes are accounted for when implementing lean initiatives.

Don't just set it and forget it. It is important to continually re-evaluate your lean manufacturing efforts. Even when you take the long-term into consideration, changes in your business plan, demand levels and industry trends can create possibilities to further improve your factory.

Don't blindly copy others. Some enterprises think they will get desirable effects by applying Lean tools that others have gotten great achievements. Successful implementation of any Lean tool must be closely related to the management philosophy. So we can't succeed by imitating and copying practices of others indiscriminately, it must be combined with local culture.

Lean is not a quick fix and you cannot pick and choose the tools you use. The key to ongoing success is to embed Lean as a philosophy, and a requirement in everybody's role; ensuring the right levels of line-management responsibility and accountability for gradually implementing the various tools and techniques that support it.

Learning is the key to success—some would even say survival—in today's organizations. Knowledge should be continuously enriched through both internal and external learning. Learning needs to become part of your daily routine. You are most likely to succeed if you consistently pursue a learning activity each day. Keep learning.

What Do's and Don'ts would you share with others starting their Lean Journey?

