Kaizen

With

KaiNexus

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Executive Summary

When doing improvement work, it's always a good idea to start with a well-formed problem statement. Before we talk about solutions, including the "Kaizen" methodology itself, we need to first understand the problems that are being solved by having a robust and effective approach to continuous improvement.

People generally want to improve. They care deeply about their work, their patients, and their customers. When there is a lack of improvement, rather than blaming individuals, we have to look at systemic factors that may be broken and interfere with attempts people make to improve their organizations. There is no lack of effort; there is no lack of desire to improve.

One of the areas where organizations sometimes get tripped up is in the reliance on top-down mandates, or "Thou shalt" improvements. Oftentimes, leaders get frustrated by the perceived reluctance to change, and state that "the people in my department hate change." But, it is more likely that people do not like being ordered to change in a way that they think wouldn't actually be better. Peter Scholtes, a great management thinker and professor, clarified this when he said "People don't resist change, they resist being changed." Additionally, people don't hate improvement, they hate being told what to do.

When we can engage people in the improvement process instead of just telling them what to do, we, as leaders, can say, "Here are the problems we need to solve," but then work together to figure out what we can do and how we can do it to solve that problem.

An Example:

In the early days of a Lean project, the KaiNexus VP of Customer Success Mark Graban visited a Med-Surg Unit to speak with the Nurse Manager. At one point, she got very distracted by the arrival of a work crew and went to find out what was going on. It turned out that they were there to install the carpet. This was the first she had heard of this grand scheme to come and install carpeting in the in the hallway in her unit. She not only had no input in this decision, but she wasn't even informed in advance.

She tried to ask some questions – "Why is the carpet being installed? What is the problem being solved?" Senior C-level leaders informed her that patient satisfaction scores needed to improve in her unit, and that the biggest complaint was noise at night. So someone in C-level who had limited direct knowledge of the department decided that the best way to reduce nighttime noise would be to install carpeting throughout the hallways.

The nurses, however, after learning that they needed to improve the scores about noise, started closing doors at night, turning down television volumes, and being more mindful about their hallway conversations. These were all little things that might be considered "Kaizen" improvements, small things that collectively solved the problem, and could have been done without the cost of the carpet installation.

Since their computers were on wheeled carts had wheels that were designed for hard floors, not for carpeting, nurses feared sprain and strain injuries, and so tended to stay in the nurses' station more to do their charting and other work. In fact, the C-level top-down mandate "Thou shalt have carpet to reduce noise" directly conflicted with the top down mandate of "Thou shalt not hang out in the nurses' station."

Why did this happen?

First of all, there was a lack of systems thinking. There is also a bit of over-reliance on supposedly proven best practices, such as carpeting in hallways reducing noise. Organizations will often spend more time trying to copy what other organizations have done instead of figuring out solutions for themselves. This isn't to say that communicating with other organizations to collaborate and share ideas is a bad thing - only that mindless mimicry without considering the differences between your organizations is often of no real benefit and can be counterproductive in many ways.

Common Dysfunctions of Improvement Programs

1. Reluctance to adopt outside ideas

About one hundred years ago, Frank Gilbreth, now considered to be one of the fathers of industrial engineering, made an observation while filming surgical procedures. The observation was that surgeons spent more time looking for their instruments than they did actually performing surgery. So he proposed a countermeasure to that problem; he called it a "surgical caddy," like a golf caddy - somebody who would hand instruments to the surgeon when they were called for. But, it took 19 years for the American Medical Association to bless this now-proven best practice as something everybody should adopt.

We have to be careful about drawing on outside experts, like Gilbreth, to tell us what we should do instead of engaging the people who do the work - in this case, the surgeons. It's interesting to think about why surgeons did not see this opportunity in their own work. Sometimes, we have blind spots to opportunities for improvement in our own work. We often need an outsider to point out problems and opportunities we can't see. But people tend to be more willing to embrace their own ideas than ideas from outsiders, no matter how correct those outsiders might be. It's possible that the AMA might have accepted this "surgical caddy" idea more quickly if it had been suggested by a surgeon. Given all of this (and the risks that come with blindly accepting outside ideas, like the carpeted hallways discussed earlier), organizations need to work hard to create a culture where insiders can bring ideas forward and create an environment where outsiders partner with insiders to develop improvements together.

2. Right tool, wrong culture

In his book The Checklist Manifesto, Dr. Atul Gawande's discusses the use of checklists – a "best practice" from aviation brought into the ORs. But, it's not as simple as having a physical checklist. As one English doctor put it, "It's not the checklist itself that's important. What matters is how it's managed."

What is really needed is a checklist with a broader culture and process surrounding it; one in which people engage; building a team, introducing each other, having an environment where people feel free to voice concerns and offer their own insight. Without this level of engagement, what remains is an environment where people mindlessly run through the checklist (often to say, "yeah, we did it") and begin the procedure without deeper consideration.

We have to be careful about taking the right tool and applying it in the wrong context or the wrong culture.

In the auto industry, there is a tool called an Andon cord which is hung above the manufacturing line. As soon as an employee spots a problem (or even suspects a problem) , they reach up and pull that cord. Chimes sound, lights blink, and, within seconds, a team leader comes and asks, "What's the problem? Can we resolve it before the line stops? Let's work on this together."

Ten years ago, a Ford plant installed a best practice Andon cord, hoping to mimic the successes of other plants. But the first time a Ford truck plant worker pulled that cord, someone came running, but not to ask "What's wrong? How can I help?" but "What's wrong with you? Why did you stop the line?"

In this case, the so-called best practice was not a good fit for the culture, and the investment had no real return. Ford workers would, understandably, stop pulling the andon cord out of fear and to avoid being yelled at. Ford arguably wasted their money by installing an andon cord system that the plant's culture, at the time, would not accept.

3. Suggestion boxes

The dysfunction of the suggestion box lies not in the box itself, but in the way it is managed. It is often a batch process where suggestions are put in the box and, at best, someone looks at it a month or a quarter later. It's not a very collaborative process – suggestions are labeled as a great idea or a bad idea without ever looking at the workplace or talking to the person who had the idea in the first place.

People need to be engaged in a different process – one which is more constructive and does not have to be locked away, hidden in a box.

4. The over-reliance on projects

The fourth dysfunction that often comes into play is the over-reliance on projects. Week-long Rapid Improvement Events are problematic because there are some problems that are big and complicated enough that you need a formal team for a week working on just that problem. There are other smaller scale problems to solve where might do a formal A3 and work on it over time, instead of having a formal team-based event.

It's not that any of these formal methodologies are bad. The problem arises from the erroneous belief of some organizations – in manufacturing and healthcare alike - that Kaizen means doing a bunch of weeklong projects. Doing that kind of work might bring about short-term changes, but it does not necessarily change the culture. Furthermore, there are many types of problems that are too small to really require eight people dedicating an entire week to fixing them. As these problems do not warrant an entire project or event, they often are overlooked.

For these reasons, and many more, we need to engage people in a process of ongoing daily continuous improvement. Events, daily Kaizen practices, and A3s all use the Plan Do Study Adjust (PDSA) improvement model and they can all work together for problems, large, small, and in between.

Improvement with Kaizen

1. Finding problems and opportunities
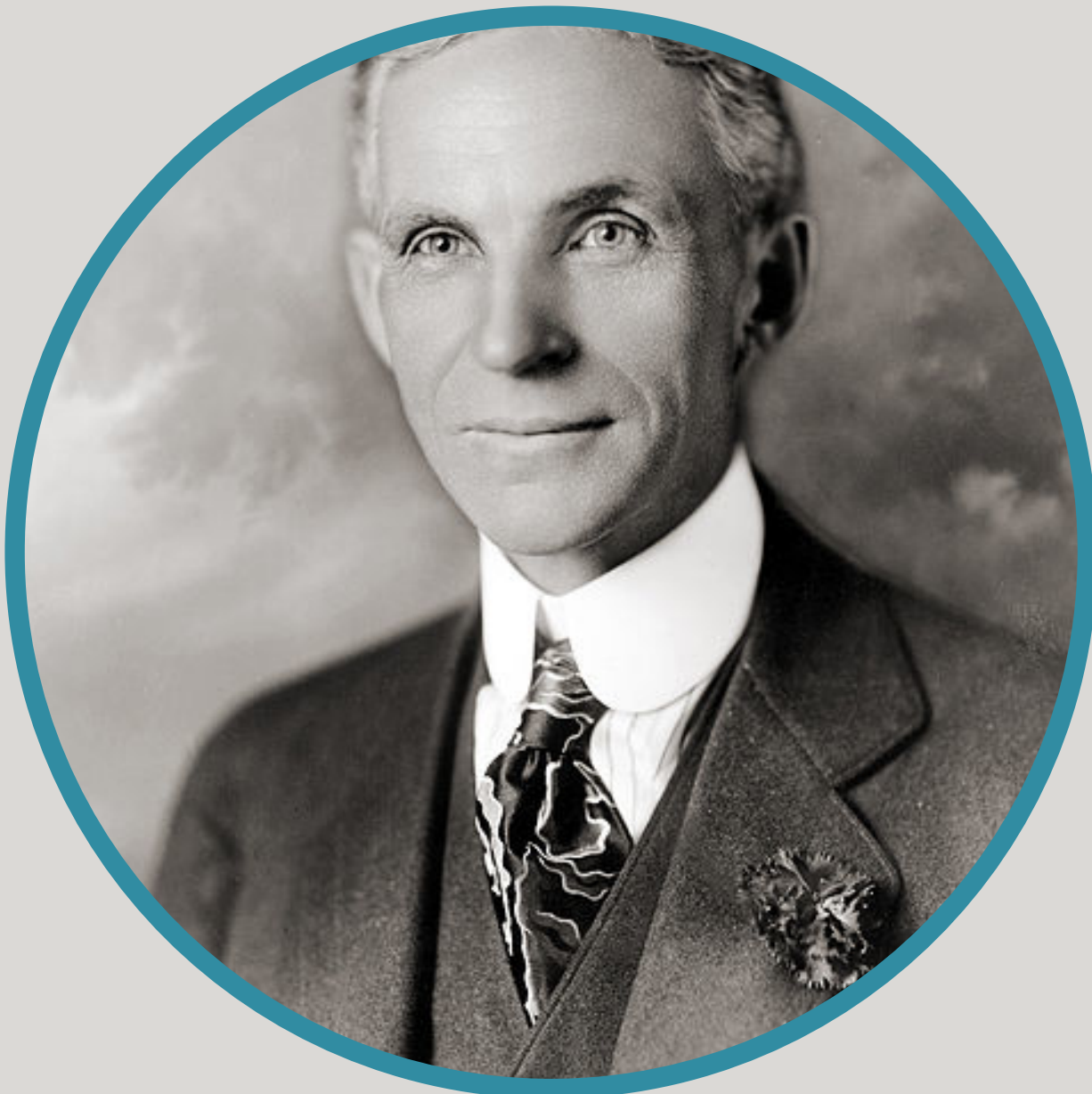
"There are no big problems; there are just lots of little problems."

-Henry Ford

When faced with seemingly unsolvable complicated problems, many people flounder a bit and the problem goes unaddressed and may even escalate. So how do you improve massive problems? The best option is probably to try breaking the down into smaller components that people can address more quickly.

When we engage people in a Kaizen process, some people are intimidated because they are trying to find the big "million dollar idea." But the goal is not to save millions of dollars with each improvement; it is to see if there is a way to make your job a little easier, save a few seconds here or there, improve patient care or the level of customer service, improve safety, or reduce waiting times. Engaging people with specific questions sometimes draws out either the identification of problems and/or the generation of ideas that can help address and solve the problems.

If somebody says, "we need to improve customer service," that's a really big problem. Skilled leaders will work with employees to break that problem down into smaller components, such as one aspect of customer service that is more narrowly defined, such as "waiting times to reach a person on the phone."

2. Collaboration

Your staff is just waiting to be asked about what's getting in the way and what the problems are. They might not know how to resolve these issues, but leaders can work with them and help bring about improvements.

3. Implementation

Kaizen isn't about people independently trying their own thing and waiting to see what sticks. As discussed already, collaboration is key to the implementation of ideas because the manager may have a perspective and an insight that is different than the employees. Combining the awareness of the frontline staff with the expanded insight of the managers brings issues to the foreground and helps bring about the best solution, together.

Another important thing to consider is the speed with which a response is given. If ideas are submitted and nothing happens with them, employees become discouraged and participation may go down.

PDSA cycles can be used to test an idea trying a change, assessing its impact, and making any necessary changes. The four stages of the PDSA cycle are:
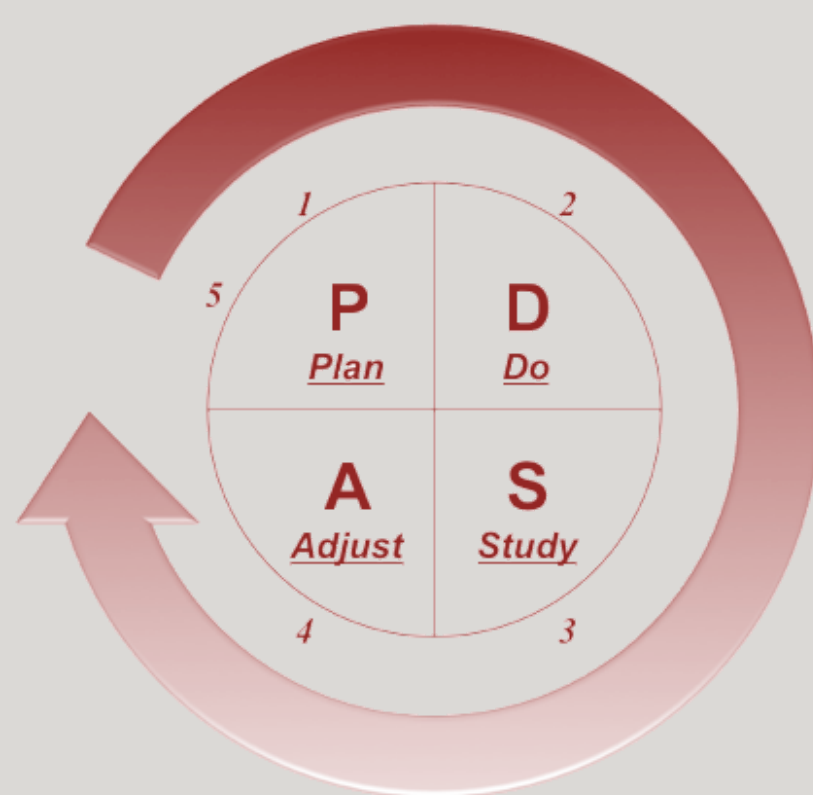
Plan – define the goals, questions, and predictions. Consider the potential risks and benefits, and come up with a good plan of action

Do – carry out the plan and collect the data

Study – analyze the impact of the change

Adjust – plan the next cycle and decide if the changes can be implemented, adopt, adapt, or abandon

Within the PDSA model, we may try things that do not work, we may implement things that help solve the immediate problem but create other issues down the line. It is important to be able to react and adjust accordingly rather than being stubborn or assuming that all ideas will work out as expected.

Find Something to Implement

It is often said at Toyota that they implement 90 percent or more of their staff ideas; some organizations hit 85-90 percent. Suggestion boxes typically see just one or two percent of ideas getting implemented.

In a Kaizen process, it's not that 90 percent of ideas were perfect right away; the challenge is for managers to help find something that solves the problem because the focus is improvement. If there's a "bad idea," managers can't just reject the idea, as that would be discouraging and demoralizing. Managers need to collaborate and work together with employees and their team members to find something that solves the problem that was identified.

4. Documentation

There are two main benefits to the documentation of progress and improvements. First, the benefit to the rest of the organization: departments are able to draw upon the successes of others for ideas and inspiration, rather than having to constantly reinvent the wheel.

Second, by documenting and sharing the impact of improvement work, employees recognize that leadership values their contributions to improving the organization. This makes them more likely to continue to engage in the organziation's culture of continuous improvement, and for others in the company to engage as well.

How do you get started?

Just start. Some organizations take a class or read a book, then follow up and do a pilot or a PDSA cycle. Sometimes doing a little bit of planning and then going and doing (or trying), goes a long way. There is very little risk to starting a Kaizen process – the worst that could happen would be someone having a "bad" idea…and that's not really a very big risk if managers are engaged and collaborating with their employees. Remember, people don't just randomly try things in a Kaizen system; they talk about the problem and ideas with their manager and teammates. If you find a "bad idea," you can work together to find something else to try.

As leaders, there are several key steps to starting a Kaizen:

- Go and ask people for their ideas.

- Coach and mentor people, leading them through that process of identifying, testing, and evaluating change. As Gary Convis, once the highest ranking American in Toyota, said, "Leaders need to add energy to the system."

- Be willing to try ideas that may not at first seem to be "good" ideas; operate under the PDSA mindset.

- Don't be focused solely on ideas that have an explicit ROI. Often, in Kaizen systems, about 20-30 percent of changes might have any sort of measurable cost savings at all; the others are just good things to do that weren't very costly but made the employees happy. Happy employees are engaged employees, which is in and of itself a great thing, but employee happiness leads to patient satisfaction, to better quality, and to better outcomes.

In Conclusion

It can be frustrating to begin developing a culture of continuous improvement within your organization. It might seem that no one else is interested or that those who are involved don't have valuable ideas. But it is important to remember that people in care deeply about their patients, customers, and their work, and that they want to improve. So when it seems like progress is not being made, remember to look beyond the perceived faults of the staff and instead investigate the system itself.

Let your team work with you, not just for you. They have valuable insight into their work and you have a broader understanding of the company as a whole; combine those fields of knowledge and bring about change, as well as encourage future staff participation. Create a culture where frontline staff feel free to bring ideas forward and collaborate with their leaders in a constructive, respectful manner. Supply your people with the tools best suited for their environment and the organization's culture. Listen to the staff and work with them to resolve whatever problem or opportunity for improvement that they bring forward.

KaiNexus

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The best way to improve your business or organization is by leveraging the collective knowledge of every employee. KaiNexus is a cloud-based software platform that unites your team around opportunities for improvement and facilitates their progress from inception to ROI.

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