Manage, the *Kaizen* Way!

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"Be not afraid of growing slowly; be afraid only of standing still."
                                                                    - Chinese Proverb

Here is a simple thought: If something remains unchanging, then it is not alive. Think. Even with no effort on your part, you keep changing. You grow older, you grow taller, you grow fatter. Go out of town for a week, and when you return the lawn needs mowing. You cannot help it; change is inevitable. In the absence of any effort on your part, though, the change may not necessarily be good: that flab on your tummy is unwanted; so is the overgrown grass in your garden.

What is the way out? You can let these things happen and then take drastic measures: go for electronic slimming or such fast-track options; hire a gardener, raze the lawn, and cement the front yard. Or, like the Japanese, you can opt for continuous improvement: jog every morning, include more veggies in your diet, and constantly weave a few such healthy habits into your lifestyle; mow the lawn every week, plant a few flowering shrubs, paint the fence, and keep improving your garden in small ways.

That is what *kaizen* is all about!

The Japanese phrase *kaizen* means *continuous improvement*, and is based on the belief that every aspect of life deserves to be improved. *Kaizen* as a management philosophy is so deep-seated in the thoughts and processes of Japanese managers that most of the time they do not even recognize it as a special technique.

While *kaizen* has become more popular in the area of manufacturing management, I think it applies beautifully to technical communications as well, because there is no denying that as writers we are all *producing* something for our target audience. In fact, writing is a very complex profession. We are offering a service, producing a product, and creating a work of art, all at the same time!

As technical writers, we go through a rigorous cycle of research, writing, and editing; and our work at each of these stages needs to be efficiently managed and constantly improved.

Whether you are an army of one like me or one of a team of technical communicators, it is worth your while to read what *kaizen* is all about, and how it can be applied to improve writing and the writer.

Introducing *Kaizen*

Managing anything--processes, resources, activities, or whatever--involves two tasks: *maintenance* and *improvement*. First you try to maintain the status quo, and then you try to progress beyond it. This progress can happen in two ways: through large-scale

innovation (that is, giving your system a major makeover; e.g., deploying a Business Process Management solution) or through *kaizen*.

While large-scale innovation would involve huge investments and radical reengineering of existing processes, *kaizen* aims at taking small steps toward improvement. Unlike innovation, *kaizen* is not dramatic. It is simple and inexpensive, and aims to use brain, rather than financial brawn, to make gradual improvements.

In any organization or business unit, it is better to adopt a balanced approach to innovation and *kaizen*. Innovation cannot happen every day, mainly because it would involve a considerable investment of effort and money. *Kaizen*, on the other hand, can happen daily. In today's competitive environment, an organization cannot remain complacent even for the short time between one innovation and the next. It has to keep improving every day, which means it needs to go the *kaizen* way!

In this article I aim to introduce the fundamental concepts of *kaizen* and how they can be applied at the management, group, and individual levels, to keep improving the morale and productivity of a team of technical writers.

Kaizen Fundamentals

Let us take a brief look at the basic aspects of *kaizen*, and understand them in the light of writing, before we look at *kaizen* in action.

First, *kaizen* is a universal concept that involves everybody in an organization, from the top management to each employee. It holds that for results to be improved, the processes should be improved; and who can improve the processes better than those who handle them day-in and day-out? Therefore, ultimately *kaizen* becomes *a people-oriented* management concept wherein the team members themselves voluntarily work toward constant improvement.

Second, *kaizen* is *quality-oriented*. It advocates continuous improvement of quality at all levels; not product quality alone, but total quality of work, employees, training, processes, standards, and so forth.

Third, *kaizen* is *competition-oriented*. In *kaizen* thought, understanding competition is an important factor for improvement. When you are concerned only with achieving an end, there is hardly any motivation to improve; but when you want to excel and do something better than others, then positive change becomes a way of life. Have you ever tried procuring the user manuals and marketing communications of competing products, analyzing them in detail, and then writing your own manual with the goal of writing a better one? If not, you should; because healthy competition is an indispensable part of *kaizen*.

Fourth, *kaizen* is *customer-oriented*. In order to make *kaizen* a habit, you first need to understand what your goal is. Is it to write fast, to use all the latest tools, to include amazing graphics in your brochure? All these are worthy aims, but none of them qualifies as the ultimate goal, according to *kaizen* thought!

Kaizen believes in *Market in; Product out*. That is, the user's manual you are writing should not be your focus; rather the customer should be. While writing every word and designing every page of that manual, you should keep the reader in mind. You may use

exemplary vocabulary; will the user understand? You may use the latest software to design the cover; will the user know? The focus should not be on the product as such but on the quality delivered to the consumer, and you should aim to add to that quality and value through constant improvement.

Here are some keywords to keep in mind as you start trying *kaizen* at work: adaptability, teamwork, active feedback and suggestion system, attention to details, proactive problem solving, open sharing of information, cross-functional orientation, and most important, the use of intellect rather than money.

Kaizen in Action

Kaizen can be applied to the technical communication function at various levels: at the management level, team or group level, and individual level.

If you are a freelance writer or an '*army of one*' as I like to call it, then the activities at all three levels might apply to you, because you are the writer and the manager as well! For the group activities, you could try involving the members of some of the writers' groups that you may belong too, or peers at the client-side.

Let us have a look at *kaizen* in action at various levels.

Management-oriented kaizen

To managers, *kaizen* would mean two things: to improve themselves, and to improve the business/functional unit that they are managing. So, if you are a manager handling a technical communication team, you will first have to look at *kaizen* in your own work. How can you improve your management skills? Read books, attend workshops, interact with your team, have frequent one-on-ones to find out how the writers feel about your management style, and so on.

Then, look at ways to improve your team. As a manager, you should first understand that your main goal is not improved economics, but improved morale. Of course, your efforts should also go into improving systems, processes, and productivity, but your main task is to keep up your team's morale. You will realize that when spirits are high, other benefits follow. Motivated employees work better; best of all, they even solve problems on their own, proactively, without coming to you!

Naomi Yamaki, former president of Mitsubishi Space Software, has beautifully explained the manager-worker relationship in *kaizen* culture: "In the revised manager-worker distinction, the worker is supposed to plan, do, and control; and management is charged with motivating workers for higher productivity."

Therefore, it is time to ask yourself whether the writers on your team are happy. Are they putting in their best efforts? How can you motivate them to keep improving? How do you keep up their morale?

Here is an example. When you see any of your team members sitting idle (they may be taking a break, or they may not have any work at the moment--let's admit it, there are times like that), what crosses your mind? Do you feel disgusted that anybody would

want to while away their time, or do you try to look at the situation from their point of view? Why have they not been motivated to make better use of their free time?

Try to arrange activities to keep them involved, interested, and busy. Help them build a small library, arrange workshops for improving their skills, upload some quizzes on your intranet so that they can test their skills when they are free, involve them and let them decide how they would want to spend their free time.

Similarly, think of various little ways in which you can improve the working of your team. Try to arrange cross-functional interactions. Your writers would certainly like to interact with the developers, and maybe even the end-user training team. As a manager, you can arrange such things easily. Also, it is important to make relevant information accessible to all team members, because informed employees get things right the first time!

Focus on building a management culture amenable to *kaizen*: emphasize training and education, foster creativity, support group activities, recognize and reward effort, and interact with team members without inhibition. It is also paramount that you take a humanistic approach to let employees pursue their personal goals and social lives, even as you instill discipline.

On the whole, for a manager, *kaizen* would manifest as improving self, system, and spirits.

Team- or group-oriented kaizen

Continuous improvement requires putting heads together! Small group activities are an indispensable part of *kaizen*. These are basically informal groups within your team (or cross-functional groups involving people from different teams) where the members come together voluntarily, to work for a specific purpose or to improve a specific area. Their goal may be to identify and solve problems, make decisions, give suggestions, devise techniques for quality improvement, brainstorm, or simply to learn something together.

Such activities promote teamwork, boost morale, act as a bridge between management and the teams, help develop new skills and foster talent, and encourage team members to solve their own problems, thereby freeing managers' time. Not one, but many reasons, for top management to support such activities.

Small group activities go beyond the clichéd Quality Control Circles; they take many forms. Here are some you could try.

- No-error movements. Form a group committed to doing away with errors. Develop standards and style sheets, work out systems for playback of data to their source for validation (for example, before writing a manual, prepare notes based on the information collected from the developers and play it back to them by e-mail for a quick fact check), prepare memory cards with common abbreviations and symbols for easy reference, and so on. Basically, meet on a regular basis and think of why errors occur, and ways to avoid them.
- Mini think-tanks. You could form brainstorming groups. Put your heads together and think about things that can be improved and ways to improve them, solutions to problems faced by the team, and so on.

- Study circles. These are pretty common in the writing community. Groups meet to learn about and discuss topics on the agenda. Often such groups may also arrange formal workshops or training sessions.
- Peer review groups. Such groups are another trend in technical communication departments, where colleagues help review each others' work.
- Open house groups. People interested in learning can come together and invite experts to every group meeting, so that the members of the group can interact with them and learn from their experience.
- Reading groups. A group can discuss and exchange interesting reading materials like books, tutorials, brochures, research papers, and links to Web sites.

Some Japanese plants have a *kaizen* corner and *kaizen* men. A *kaizen* corner is an area that is loaded with resources and tools for *kaizen*. You could set up a *kaizen* room and furnish some books on subjects like effective communication, writing, marketing, and management; dictionaries, style manuals, tutorials on commonly used tools; and reading material about the kinds of products you document. You could also set up a computer that runs quizzes or short presentations on relevant subjects, so that those who are interested can spend a few useful moments now and then.

Kaizen men are employees who are entrusted with the task of deliberately looking for areas to be improved. Their regular workloads are reduced slightly so that they can spend time on *kaizen*. This role can be taken in turns by the team members.

Individual-oriented kaizen

On the individual level, *kaizen* involves developing a positive attitude toward change and making efforts to improve your own work. On a broader level, it manifests as the suggestion system, where managers welcome feedback and act on it. All team members should keep their eyes open and suggest ways to improve work environment, quality, processes, and customer relations, and to eliminate errors, waste, and inefficiency.

Identifying and solving problems are important *kaizen* activities. Basically, instead of shying away from problems, you learn to face them. Look at all those who receive your work as *internal customers,* and make sure that you do not burden them with carried-over problems! Resolve never to pass on a problem to the next process. In fact, *kaizen* goes a step further than solving problems. It recommends *warusa kagen*, where you identify not just problems, but even those little anomalies that are not really problems but are imperfect nonetheless.

Kaizen also requires that you develop pride in what you do, because in the absence of pride, continuous improvement is not even remotely possible. Relate your work to the value delivered to the customer. As you write every word, think of the end user who will read it. And as *kaizen* recommends, ask yourself if you are proud enough to buy what you build!

Kaizen Tools

There are umpteen tools for *kaizen*, including statistical tools such as Pareto diagrams, fishbone diagrams, histograms, control charts, scatter diagrams, and check sheets and graphs. These are common problem-solving tools and you will find loads of material about them on the World Wide Web, so I will not go into the details.

Here, let us look at two distinct *kaizen* tools that I think are extremely relevant to improving our work as technical communicators.

Three-MU checklist of kaizen activities: Muda, Muri, and Muva

This checklist urges to you to remove *muda* (waste), *muri* (strain), and *muva* (discrepancy) in various areas such as goals, manpower, technology, methods, time, facilities, tools, materials, and way of thinking. Make posters proclaiming these three keywords in bold letters, and put them up all around your workplace so that you are constantly reminded of the tasks.

Analyze your processes, identify any unnecessary tasks that you keep repeating unnecessarily, and eliminate them. If you're straining to do something that can be done in an easier way, simplify. Identify areas where discrepancies arise; develop standards. Avoid *muda, muri* and *muva* in every aspect of work.

Five-step kaizen movement: Seiri, Seiton, Seiso, Seiketsu, and Shitsuke

I learned these five words only because they sounded nice and musical; but today they are an inseparable part of my work culture. Check out how to build *kaizen* into your work with the five-step framework.

Seiri - Straighten up! The first step toward improvement is to straighten things up. Identify and discard all unnecessary items, including papers and documents that have been lying untouched on your desk for ages. Analyze and eliminate needless tools and procedures. Clear up pending workloads. Basically, get rid of all things that you do not want to have around when you start afresh!

Seiton - Put things in order! In other words, get organized. Put things where they belong so that you can find them quickly when they are needed. Also, put in a little effort to stock your table with some commonly needed things. Just give a thought to how much time we waste every day searching for papers, pens, and tape! Get yourself some stationery and stack it neatly in an accessible area. Once you start, you are sure to find a lot of areas that need organizing: addresses, appointments, notes, and whatnot; and various long-forgotten gear like the organizer, to-do list, and pen holder will resurface.

While you are at it, organize the folders in your hard drive also. I know how often we tend to just dump files in the *My Documents* folder without a second thought. Use this opportunity to organize the files in your computer into meaningfully named folders so that they are findable.

Seiso - Clean up! When you were young, your mom was at your back needling you to clean your room. Now, I am telling you the same thing. A clean workplace is a pleasure to work in. Moreover, your workplace reflects on your attitude toward work. In fact, it is the first thing your clients notice when they search for clues to judge you by.

It is worth paying attention to cleaning up your workplace. If you can, beautify it too. Add a vase of flowers, a nice painting, a motivational poster, a reminder of the five-step framework, whatever you like.

Seiketsu - Personal cleanliness! Very important. Dress well to work. You are likely to feel chirpier and more energetic. Going deeper, I would say personal cleanliness also means coming to work with a clear mind, ready to face the challenges of the day ahead.

Shitsuke - Discipline! Where there are procedures, rules, standards, or manuals to be followed, follow them. Do not devise workarounds. Standards are meant to be followed, otherwise why would they be there in the first place? Of course, it is also important that the rules, standards, and procedures are constantly fine-tuned to changing times. Antiquated rules can only force discipline, they cannot earn it. Nonetheless, even if there is nobody to impose discipline upon you, it helps to be self-disciplined because it introduces a certain order into your life, and helps you cope with certain mundane yet indispensable tasks, like mowing the lawn every week.

It is *Kaizen* Time, Folks!

That is *kaizen* as I know it. I first read about the concept while in college, when writing a course paper on improving management in manufacturing plants.

Later, when I started out freelancing, it dawned on me that there was nobody to oversee me. I was my own manager! I had to fall back on every ounce of management wisdom that I had to organize myself, to meet my deadlines, and to turn out excellent work.

Above all this, I had to keep improving my work constantly to avoid falling into the devil's snare of doing the same work in the same way again and again till burn-out time! That is when I experimented with the *kaizen* concepts that I learned from Masaaki Imai's book. It was a simple, no-fuss technique; more like a habit that I could weave into my work culture. And it worked like a charm! You will believe me only when you try it firsthand, so please do.

Suggested reading

Imai, Masaaki. *Kaizen: The Key to Japan's Competitive Success.* Singapore**:** McGraw-Hill International Editions, Management Series, 1991.

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