

Facilities Management from A to Z



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Kaizen

Kaizen is an approach to quality improvement focused on a philosophy of continuous improvement. Kaizen was created in Japan following World War II. The word Kaizen literally means 'continuous improvement'. It comes from the Japanese words 'kai' which means 'change' or 'to correct' and 'zen' which means "good".

Kaizen is a rigorous, scientific management method using statistical quality control and an adaptive framework of organisational values and beliefs that keeps workers and management focused on reducing defects or improving results. It is a philosophy of never being satisfied with what was accomplished last week or last year.

This approach assumes that employees are the best people to identify room for improvement, since they see the processes in action all the time. A facilities manager that uses this approach therefore has to create a culture that encourages and rewards team members for their contribution to the process.

Everyone is encouraged to come up with small improvement suggestions on a regular basis. This is not a once a month or once a year activity. It is continuous. In Japanese companies, such as Toyota and Canon, as many as 60 to 70 suggestions per employee per year are written down, shared and implemented. In most cases these are not ideas for major changes. Kaizen is based on making small changes on a regular basis, always improving productivity, safety and effectiveness while reducing waste.

At its best, Kaizen is a carefully nurtured philosophy that works smoothly and steadily, and which helps to align rigid organisational inputs and aims (especially in process-driven environments), with softer management issues such as motivation and empowerment. However, like any methodology, poor interpretation and implementation can limit the usefulness of Kaizen practices, or even cause them to be counter-productive.

For Kaizen to be effective there has to be a culture of trust between staff and managers, supported by a democratic structure and a positive view of employees. Good two-way communications and a de-layered organisation also support this approach. Nevertheless, some team members can see the demands as an extra burden rather than an opportunity and it can take time to embed Kaizen successfully into a facilities team culture.

Kaizen is an approach that works well in facilities management as engaging with front line teams to continuously improve service details from the front line can be highly rewarding.

Masaaki Imai was the quality guru who first drew the west's attention to Kaizen in the early 1980's. His seminal book is called "Kaizen, the key to Japan's competitive success" ISBN-10: 007554332X