

Nothing ever changes round here!

Kaizen and the benefit of immediate improvements

An accusation I often hear levelled at Continuous Improvement events is that while they end with a well-meaning action plan, all too often people who attended go back to their usual jobs and don't find the time to complete any of it. We've all attended action plan reviews where people either stumble through excuses for not having done anything, or just don't turn up at all. This can be a serious flaw in an improvement program – if people start to see lots of meetings taking place but no changes coming out of them it can undermine the whole concept of change within the organisation. Once the notion that “nothing ever changes round here” takes root the cultural impact can become a much bigger problem than the one you originally set out to solve.

An excellent way of avoiding that situation is to run Kaizen events.

What is it?

Kaizen, a Japanese word simply meaning improvement, is where the event is planned not to just end with an action plan but with the actions actually complete. A Kaizen event is harder to plan because it takes more resources and may involve a separate contingency plan for managing the usual work activities. Also, facilitation is a very different experience for people who are used to events mostly involving moving post-it notes around. However, the immediacy of the impact is both better for the business and a great sign to employees that when the company decides to improve a process it does actually happen.

A good example of a successful Kaizen event has been run at a gas cylinder filling plant. The core process involved receiving empty welding gas cylinders from customers, refilling them, and sending them back out. In a naturally declining market place, for many years there had been slightly more cylinders returning than going out. This eventually began to have an impact on the amount of cylinders filled per shift, as the operators were forced into spending their time sorting through empty cylinders to find the right sizes for the orders they were trying to fulfil.



It was clear that the solution involved some aspects of 5S on the plant – although the detail of what should go where would take some defining, the plant needed a major sort out. What was also clear though was that if a few key people got together for a day or so and designed a new layout and then left the Plant Manager with the future state plans, he would struggle to find the resource to implement the changes. After presenting a cost benefit analysis to senior management, balancing the cost of resources required versus the increased productivity in future, agreement was gained for a Kaizen event.

For several weeks prior to the event, the plant used overtime, filling extra cylinders to build up a stock so they could have a week of downtime. On the event itself the only activity left for the operators was the distribution, everyone involved in filling was able to take part. The first step was to measure the current state, literally measuring how much space was available and counting each type of cylinder in stock. Next, by analysing historical order data, the team identified which cylinders should go where in order to minimise movement during the filling process.

By lunchtime on day two, a full improvement plan was created and it was time to make the actual changes. The next two days were spent sorting cylinders onto full pallets of each size and moving them into the desired locations with fork lift trucks, with the whole team getting together for regular updates to discuss progress and problems encountered. By the afternoon of day four, most activity was around painting line markings and putting up signs to enable the operators to maintain the improvements.

A full report out was created and presented to everyone on the plant on day five, ensuring everyone understood the new way of working and could see the benefit of the disruption they'd encountered during the week.

The following week everyone's working patterns went back to normal, but the number of cylinders filled per shift was immediately improved. The cost of the overtime incurred during the planning phase was quickly outweighed by the increased productivity, and it was also a very positive introduction to the concept of Continuous Improvement for the plant operators. The fact that the change was run as a Kaizen meant the financial benefits were felt immediately, and there were no long term actions outstanding.



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Mike joined Bourton Group last year building on a successful career in performance improvement with Air Products. He is a certified Lean Six Sigma Black Belt with nine years' experience of leading hard benefit generating projects across multiple functions of a large organisation. He has delivered numerous Continuous Improvement training courses, and coached colleagues at all stages of the Lean Six Sigma training process.

Bourton Group has supported many businesses from a wide range of industries to implement Lean improvement techniques via tailored engagement programs.

We work collaboratively to deliver on efficiency objectives and targets, with returns on investment of over 20:1 being reported, along with wider benefits of reducing waste, decreasing time to complete activities and improvements to quality – all of which have been directly attributed to Lean.