

# Kaizen your Kaizen Event

How to successfully run your  
manufacturing improvement events

By Phil Tackett-Irwin, Project Management Consultant  
Integrated Project Management Company, Inc.

They changed  
everything and  
then left me to  
make it work.

All they gave me was  
this mocked-up tool.  
It won't last the week.

My new instructions  
don't really match  
what I need to do.

## Definitions

**Kaizen:** Continuous improvement of an entire value stream or an individual process to create more value with less waste.

**Kaizen Event:** A Kaizen activity, commonly lasting several days, in which a team identifies and implements a significant improvement in a process that supports a Lean Manufacturing initiative.

Reference: Lean Enterprise Institute

Overhearing griping team members? Fix negative perceptions of a several-day improvement effort by *Kaizen*ing your Kaizen. Follow these basic steps and tips to run it like a project. Here's how.

### Step 1: Go to the Gemba

The first and most important step is to uncover more about the problem that you'd like to address because there's no use in putting your energy into the wrong issue. As the lean-adopted Japanese word suggests, go to the real place, the *gemba*, to see and gain insight on the issues.

When onsite, realize the data you have is the start – not the end. Let it point you in the right direction, then verify. Is the operation the same as you had thought? Analyze the process, set-up, cycle times and physical condition. Don't forget to double-check the site for upcoming changes that might interfere with the Kaizen event. For example, is there any maintenance scheduled? Will key personnel be available to answer your questions? Going to the *gemba* before you start will spotlight the necessary focus areas.

## Step 2: Plan For the Event

Instead of approaching your Kaizen event with the attitude that the team “will just figure it out,” plan for it.

### *Draft a problem statement and determine objectives*

Now that you’ve gone to the gemba, you should be able to draft a problem statement based on your observations. Identify the issues you’d like to address during the Kaizen, such as material flow, quality, and safety. Pull historical data to help establish the current state.

Think about your goals for conducting an event and align them with your organization’s objectives, paying special attention to their relevance and the overall synergy. Consider how you want to stress the importance of the vision to the team. When communicated properly, individuals will be proud to have helped the entire company when you broadcast your successful Kaizen post event.

### *Identify the Kaizen team*

Think outside of the typical Kaizen team consisting of Operators and Engineers. Strive to create a well-rounded team by including representation from Marketing, Sales, Suppliers, and Executive Management, as well as support areas like Quality, Supply Chain, and Document Control. These members can add a different perspective to the Kaizen and empower the team with expert knowledge about a process or an issue. Foster communication with these resources by encouraging a lot of “what if” type questions. Get approval from team members’ managers, remembering to emphasize the time commitment of the Kaizen event.

**Someone with a broader perspective of the issue, like a product supplier, would be a great addition to the Kaizen team. He/She may be able to shed light on the availability of other products that could solve manufacturing glitches.**

### *Gather resources and tools*

Identify a place for team members to work that is isolated from their “day jobs” to ensure a focused effort. Have an abundance of mock-up supplies on hand such as cardboard, flipcharts, tape, scissors, string, and a label maker. If the team has an idea they would like to pursue, preemptively communicate with the individuals or companies that may be affected to test the viability. For example, if you are thinking of making new tools or fixtures, communicate your intentions to your internal tool room or local machine shop to ensure they are able to create or source the items and are prepared for a quick turnaround.



“Bring in individuals outside the Kaizen who can **empower** the team with knowledge”

## Step 3: Execute With Purpose

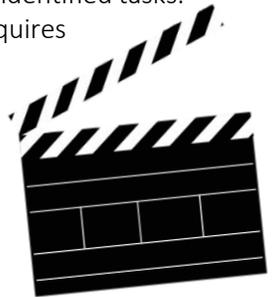
### *Plan the work*

Start each morning with a 30-60 minute meeting to talk through the day's required activities. During the meeting, list the activities out on a flip chart, assign an owner to each activity, and set the sequence of events for the day to ensure all tasks can be completed within the allotted time frame. In addition, think about potential issues that may arise and establish a response plan for each. Issues can be extremely distracting to a Kaizen team when the "What do we do next?" has not been well determined. Always correlate the day's action plan back to the original problem statement. This will minimize the risk of scope creep.

**Establish a facilitator and note taker so that Kaizen team members can focus on the brainstorming sessions. For example, if an operator has an idea and you're an engineer by trade, help the team understand concepts by sketching them.**

### *Work the plan*

After the daily meeting, set the team off to perform the identified tasks. Though this sounds logical and perhaps easy, it often requires immense effort to keep team members focused on the Kaizen instead of their normal responsibilities. Establish rules against returning to machines, offices, checking e-mail and voicemail, and filtering through their respective work areas. Activities that were not listed in the plan should be avoided.



### *Report out daily*

Because Kaizens move quickly and change direction many times throughout the process, it is important to report out often. Lunch is a great time to facilitate a mid-day report out of events. The team needs to eat, a free meal improves morale, and the casual atmosphere opens up the team to discuss issues that arose that morning so that action plans can be developed. Also reserve time at the end of the day to reflect and wrap-up while the events of the day are fresh. The outcomes of the wrap-up meeting will provide the Kaizen facilitator time to prepare for the next morning's planning meeting.

## Step 4: Close It Out

Kaizen teams often close with a celebration on the final day of the event. The unfortunate reality is that come the following week, team members return to their normal routine, overwhelmed by the amount of work that was neglected the prior week. As a result, all the benefits from the Kaizen stop and are oftentimes forgotten. Try this instead: give the team some time to catch up on work and bring the team back together two or three days later to properly close out the Kaizen. Hold this meeting to:



### *Celebrate success*

Acknowledge the team for the value that the previous week's efforts had on the business. It can be as simple as bringing in refreshments and highlighting accomplishments by depicting the before and after.

### *Review parking lot and long-lead items*

Document all outstanding items into an Open Issue Log. Assign each item to a team member or the appropriate department and get commitment on the completion dates for these items. Post a copy of this log in the work area the Kaizen affected, and provide additional blank spaces so that others are able to raise new concerns during the transition period.

### *Capture lessons learned*

Discuss what went well and what went rough, allowing all team members to have equal authority to promote opportunities for improvement. These ideas should be reviewed as part of the next Kaizen's planning period and incorporated into the Kaizen process so it receives the same level of continuous improvement as the business.

So, the next time you facilitate a Kaizen event, remember to over-prepare, set expectations, capture progress, and stick to the scope of the Kaizen! When difficult issues arise, you'll be able to take solace in the smooth execution of your Kaizen project and ultimately overturn those initial negative perceptions.



### **About the author**

Phil Tackett-Irwin is a Project Management Consultant at Integrated Project Management (IPM), a consulting firm that advises on and executes companies' most complex initiatives. He has 19 years of cross-industry manufacturing experience and training in supply chain, procurement, and inventory management. He holds a Bachelor of Science in Industrial Engineering and a Masters of Business Administration.