

## Kaisen – Background

### Translation – 'Kaisen'

The original kanji characters for this word are shown below:

In Japanese this is pronounced 'kaizen'.

改 ('kai') **KAI** means 'change' or 'the action to correct'.

善 ('zen') **ZEN** means 'good'.

In Chinese this is pronounced 'gai shan':

改善 ('gǎi shàn') means 'change for the better' or 'improve'.

改 ('gǎi') means 'change' or 'the action to correct'.

善 ('shàn') means 'good' or 'benefit'. 'Benefit' is more related to the Taoist or Buddhist philosophy, which gives the definition as the action that 'benefits' the society but not one particular individual. In other words, one cannot benefit at another's expense. The quality of benefit that is involved here should be sustained forever, in other words the 'shan' is an act that truly benefits others.

Why is the concept of Kaisen now at the centre of our Team Building processing? We have been working with a UK consultant, Bill White of Illingworth Partners. Here is his experience:-

"During the late-nineties our partner in Illingworth, Bill White, had the privilege of being invited to tour the new, futuristic Toyota plant that had opened up at Burnaston in the West Midlands. They were working with Toyota and Lexus at the time on some major people development programs and the tour was arranged as part of his induction into the culture of the two companies.

This proved to be a turning point in how he viewed people, and more particularly team development. Although he had employed similar concepts throughout both his corporate and consultancy careers, observation of the Kaisen concept in operation, both as a tool for developing people, and as a process for breaking down barriers in communication, was just staggering.

Here they were, in the UK, taking a glimpse inside an automotive production plant. An industry that was dominated by males, and yes the type of male who loved his cars, fast driving, motor sport loving, testosterone generating, alpha males. Added to that we had an automotive industry in the UK that had a reputation, in terms of union unrest and strikes, of being a hotbed of 'worker and management' confrontation

There were people working in teams, identified by their sweatshirts of blue, yellow, red, working together, apparently enjoying their work. There was music playing, and their teams seemed to be run by fairly young leaders, who were not afraid to get their hands dirty alongside their people. There was evidence of efficiency everywhere, and no sign of stringent demarcation lines anywhere. There was a large presence of robot machines which had taken over some of the more mundane jobs previously carried out by the employees. But of course, up until this point, the UK unions had been sticking their heads in the sand

having driven most UK car production out of the country because their practices meant that their companies could no longer 'compete'.

Two things still stick with Bill from this visit. The first was in the Toyota lecture theatre after the tour, when the senior manager gave a short presentation about the factory and what they had set out to achieve. And yes, this senior manager in this male dominated industry was a female, who not only presented the Kaisen concept but also detailed the achievements resulting from its introduction.

She asked for any questions at the end of her presentation and Bill was first to put up his hand and asked, "How did you achieve this? In an industry dominated by union aggression and practices that seems to impede efficiency you have changed it all around. How did you achieve such a turnaround when faced with so many barriers?"

Her reply will never be forgotten, "It was easy", she said, "we didn't employ anyone from the automotive industry. The girl you saw leading the red team at the first stop on the tour was a nurse before joining us as a team leader"

It was easy! Think about this. We British were so deeply entrenched in our ways, too caught up in our "if it ain't broke don't fix it" culture, that the only way to overcome it was to recruit good, new people with the right attitude and open minds.

The second revelation was the way that Kaisen itself worked. There was a wire, suspended from the factory ceiling, that ran all the way round the production line. Everyone in the factory, from the Managing Director down to the newest recruit, was empowered to stop the production line. Anyone could walk over, reach up and bring the whole production line to a halt. In a traditional British factory, you would not even have been empowered to pick up a mop to clean up a spillage because "it was someone else's job".

Each team sent a representative to weekly Kaisen meetings where they sat down and looked at ways to improve results or efficiency. Not a finger pointing it is the 'sales prevention team's fault' approach but a process that focused on 'how can we make it better?'

It was at this stage that Bill and his company, Illingworth Partners, embraced the principles of Kaisen into their Training and Learning process. They adapted the base principle, which was focused on improving process, to one that focused on improving process, knowledge, skills, and attitude. Mission Possible now use the same principles and system, adapted to the Philippine culture and business, as a Team Building processing tool.

The basic model is simplicity itself, and uses three key questions:

1. What have I (or we) done well?
2. What could I (or we) have done better?
3. What do I (or we) need to do or put in place to ensure we raise the bar next time?

### **A word of warning!**

Although the model itself is simple to follow it does require a change of approach, and sometimes culture as well. At Mission Possible we work to identify key company, team, or individual issues that potentially inhibit progress, enabling us to support you in the understanding and implementation of the Kaisen model.