

Keepin' it Kaizen

Creating (and sustaining) a culture of cost reduction and waste elimination.

Regular readers of this column know well my obsession with lean surface finishing. One of my favorite lean tools, Kaizen, has been used by many finishers to reduce labor and materials costs, and to drastically and rapidly improve service, delivery and quality.

For some insights on the benefits of Kaizen, and some hints on how it can be implemented, *Never Finished* recently posed several questions to Pedro Font, plant manager for Metokote Corp.'s coatings facility in San Antonio, TX.

Pedro, how has Kaizen benefited your operation?

Kaizen is our foundation for cost reduction and waste elimination. It has become part of our culture. In our daily operations we use Kaizen for everything from small changes to large projects. We use Kaizen primarily to make the job easier for our team members; when you add all those small improvements they make a big impact to the operation cost.

We believe that Kaizen should be a simple, low-cost solution rather than a costly initiative.

What is the schedule for a typical Kaizen?

Every manager is required to conduct one Kaizen event per month. Our Kaizen events are not the typical 3-5 day events in which you follow a spe-

cific schedule. Instead, every manager identifies an area, problem or potential cost reduction idea and presents it to his group for brainstorming. Once the solution has been identified, the change is implemented and documented. The criteria to be considered a "Kaizen Event" is that it generates an improvement in the following categories: Productivity (Pieces per direct labor per hour, Square foot per labor per hour), Quality (Internal or External PPMs), Safety or Environmental. For Safety and Environmental we define improvement as any activity or initiative that helps with accident prevention or helps with our environmental program even if they are difficult to quantify on savings.

Who typically participates in your Kaizen events?

Every manager leads his own event with the help of his direct reports. Being a small company we typically use two to three team members per Kaizen.

What are the keys to a successful Kaizen event?

What makes our Kaizen program unique is that it is based on simple criteria where every good idea counts. Some companies that have complicated reward systems for Kaizen or cost reduction ideas find it complicated to implement and follow up. It is also difficult for a small organization to pull a team of more than three members to work on a dedicated project in a regular basis. Our program, rather than being a structured set of guidelines, concentrates more on promoting the Kaizen philosophy of continuous improvement, from management down, until it becomes a culture.

Once the initiative begins, make it mandatory for managers to participate and come up with a minimum number of Kaizen or cost reduction ideas per month. Create short and long term plans for implementation.

Describe the results of some of your most successful events

Improve productivity in medium size parts. We achieved a 40% productivity improvement by implementing standardized work; we re-arranged stations

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to present parts and tools to the operator right at the point of use, reducing walking to the minimum possible, we also redesigned racks to maximize the number of parts you can load. Design of racks is an important part of Kaizen, we not only look for ways to maximize the number of parts per rack but the most efficient way for the team members to load them.

How do you sustain improvements once they are achieved?

Every team member is evaluated in an OJT (On the job training and Safety Behavior Interventions) to ensure standard work is followed. By auditing standardized work on a monthly basis you can provide feedback to team members and ensure consistency in the operation.

What advice do you have for companies initiating their Lean Journey/using Kaizen as an improvement tool?

Make it simple, train managers on basic Kaizen and lean principles. Once the initiative begins, make it mandatory for managers to participate and come up with a minimum number of Kaizen or cost reduction ideas per month. Create short and long term plans for implementation. The first year the focus should be to promote a continuous improvement culture.

What common pitfalls should surface finishers be aware of so they can avoid them?

Structured 3–5 day Kaizen events require excessive time that sometimes small companies don't have; instead, small companies should focus on the Kaizen principle of implementing small changes in a continuous basis and document them. When you look back in time you realize how big of an impact all those small ideas made. ■

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