

LEAN INSIGHTS

Go to the gemba

How to use kaizen effectively *By Dr. Timothy Hill*

A little while ago, I presented at the Second Canadian Quality Congress and had the opportunity to meet one of my mentors, Masaaki Imai. We recalled the 1988 opening of the Japanese Kaizen Institute in Japan, and his 1986 book called *Kaizen*.

It was his followup of that book, called *Gemba Kaizen*, that came to mind after the conference. I recalled a 1997 interview Imai did with *Quality Digest* right after the publication of his book.

When asked about why he called his book *Gemba Kaizen*, he answered: "Gemba means the place where real actions take place. It usually refers to the place where manufacturing activities are conducted in a factory, as well as the place where employees have direct contact with customers in the service sectors. Gemba can be a hotel dining room, a car dealer's service department, a doctor's examination room. One place that is not gemba is a manager's desk."

When asked if he thought that U.S. companies were using kaizen effectively, he answered: "Many companies still have not fully embraced the kaizen concept, although I suspect they would argue with me about my comment. But I see a lack of kaizen when I look at how companies address the actual cost of making products. Most companies still subscribe to the old paradigm, which says that better quality costs more money. The real challenge to management is to improve quality while reducing cost, because that is what today's customers want."

Imai observed that many North Americans simply did not get kaizen. He chose the title *Gemba Kaizen* as a reminder to go to the gemba (where the problem actually is) in order to do kaizen.

While Imai's comments were made 13 years ago, I believe they still hold true today. So how does one avoid missing the goal of using kaizen effectively?

- **Listen to those closest to production.** Do your gemba walk and ask your employees for their feedback about the issues they see impacting them. Don't expect them to come forward right away if you're just starting this. With a little bit of time and a history of acting on their feedback, they will be more forthcoming with ideas and suggestions. Also, listen to the customers; they are the other group

that's closest to production.

- **Treat going to the gemba as a mandate of the manager's position.** If it's not in the job description or if it doesn't make it to the performance review so that doing well is rewarded, it's not going to happen.

- **Train people in problem solving for addressable root causes.** This is centrally important and keeps people from acting on symptoms and not true root causes. If people are not well trained in root cause analysis, their countermeasures will not take hold and become sustainable. Problem solving is the driving force behind continuous improvement.

- **Train people to develop countermeasures that eliminate, not manage, the problems.** Similar to the above, many people do a poor job of creating countermeasures. This is bad for at least two reasons. The first is that it destroys the likelihood of future employee participation. This "change fatigue" is the result of being a part of the change process and not having any successful change. The second comes from the fact that most organizations are really good at managing their problems and not eliminating them.

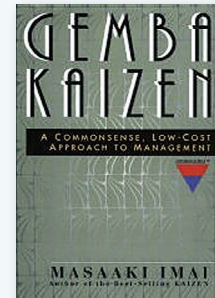
- **Encourage everyone to contribute to kaizen.** Kaizen works best when it is "owned" by people. They need to see kaizen as both empowering individuals and teams, and as a truly practical way to improve quality and performance. Once this is in place, job satisfaction increases. As ever, kaizen depends on commitment from senior management to encourage and support kaizen, and to ensure improvements produce not only better productivity and profit for the organization, but also better recognition and reward for employees, whose involvement drives the change and improvement in the first place.

Imai says, "Kaizen is the single most important concept in Japanese management — the key to Japanese competitive success." I'm inclined to agree, as it underscores the Toyota Production System and other quality systems. *

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From the book shelf

Since I mentioned *Gemba Kaizen* in my Lean Insights column, it seems appropriate to do a review. Masaaki Imai's *Gemba Kaizen: A Commonsense, Low-Cost Approach to Management* was published in 1997 as a followup to his original work. In the book, Imai argues that companies can become more profitable by constantly looking for efficiencies, instead of seeking huge leaps, as is the Western custom.



The kaizen philosophy says that businesses must cut waste by eliminating anything that's even remotely inefficient. These strategies will lead to further reductions in production costs, lower costs to customers and improve employee morale. Imai makes compelling arguments, and supports them with a number of case studies and real world examples that show

kaizen in action.

While *Gemba Kaizen* reflects an operations bias, there are excellent take-away messages for all sectors. Some of the principles, such as the need for good housekeeping, seem simplistic, but Imai is on solid ground, demonstrating the practicality of gemba kaizen with a number of abbreviated case studies.

Imai has half a century of experience helping companies continuously improve. He advocates the adoption of Lean manufacturing principles, just-in-time processes and Kanban, which should result in increased company profitability without adversely impacting employee morale and trust. I recommend this book for managers involved in the implementation of Lean manufacturing and kaizen principles.

Question from the floor

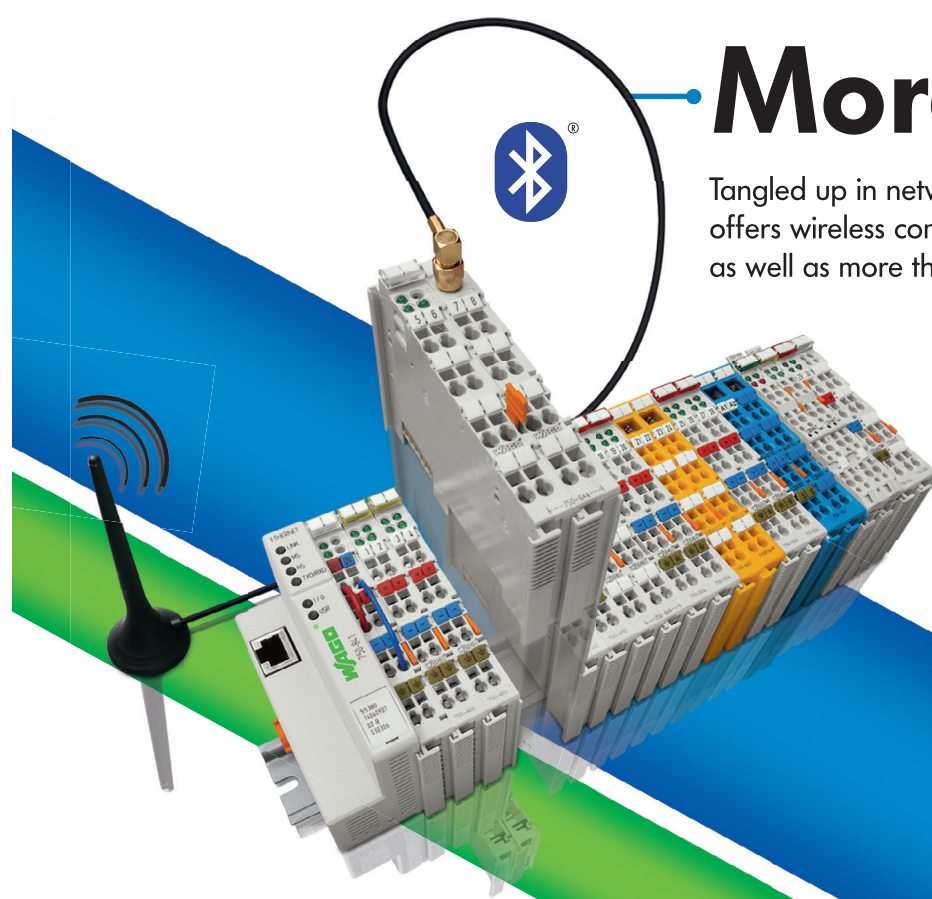
QUESTION: I run a manufacturing facility and try to lead by example. I do my MBWA (Management By Walking About) so that I'm close to the gemba. My trouble is that I can't get my managers and senior people to do this and stick to it. They seem to go to the gemba every now and then. What can I do to keep them going to the gemba?

ANSWER: Let's answer this one on two fronts — your MBWA and then getting your team to stick with going to the gemba.

MBWA was certainly popular, but were you just passing through while walking about, or were you actively called upon to help or listen to a problem? Taiichi Ohno once said that if you walked the length of football field in your factory and you did that walk in 10 minutes, you were not going to the gemba. If you took that same walk and it took you 30 minutes or more, you were going to the gemba. The extra time meant that you were stopped and asked questions. You were being useful, involved and serving as a resource.

The management team will react to your MBWA. If you're giving it lip service, so will they. If, however, you're doing a good gemba walk and your management team is still only paying lip service, you need to change their accountabilities. Put it into their job description and make sure that it gets measured in their performance review. If it doesn't get measured, it won't get managed. Indeed, if it doesn't get measured and possibly rewarded, people will not pay attention.

— Dr. Timothy Hill



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