

Magic Circle

Written by Bob Baldwin, Editor
Monday, 01 June 1998 21:42



Kaizen means continuous improvement. It was one of the few Japanese words I understood, until I had an opportunity to spend some time with Masaaki Imai, chairman of the Kaizen Institute and author of *Gemba Kaizen* (McGraw-Hill, 1997). I found out there is more to kaizen than I had thought, and I learned a few more Japanese words.

Imai says there are two approaches to problem solving. The first involves innovation, which typically means the application of technology, often at considerable cost. The second, kaizen, uses common sense tools and techniques that do not cost much money.

Kaizen is a philosophy to be practiced by everyone at the plant. The major components of kaizen are total quality management, total productive maintenance (TPM), just-in-time (JIT) management, quality circles, and suggestion systems. I was fortunate to see Imai's American consultants facilitating work of three kaizen teams in a light manufacturing plant near here. One team was installing TPM, the other two were addressing JIT issues.

The two new Japanese words I learned are muda and gemba. Muda means waste, and includes any activity that does not add value. The elimination of muda is one of three ground rules for kaizen. The other two are housekeeping and standardization.

Gemba is the most important word I learned. It means "real place" or that place where value is added. In manufacturing, it usually refers to the shop floor. Within Japanese

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industry, the word gemba is almost as popular as kaizen.

Because gemba is the place where value is added, it is at the center of what is right or wrong with plant production processes. It follows that the practice of kaizen in gemba can improve plant performance.

In his book, Imai tells the story of the importance of gemba to Taiichi Ohno, who is credited with having developed the Toyota production system. When Ohno noticed a supervisor out of touch with the realities of gemba, he would take the supervisor to the plant, draw a circle, and have the supervisor stand in it until he gained awareness. Ohno urged managers, too, to visit gemba. He would say, "Go to gemba every day."

Think how much you could get done in your plant if some of the managers would come to gemba occasionally and stand in that magic circle until they were slightly aware of what is going on. Come to think of it, most of us could benefit from an extra turn in the gemba circle studying maintenance and reliability activity with our associates and other plant personnel. **MT**

