

Getting the Most from Lean Consultants

When a company brings in an outside consultant or trainer, it is important to organize the time so that the consultant has the maximum opportunity to transfer his or her skill, knowledge and experience to the company.

This is a series of recommendations for creating a robust kaizen leadership and management process to:

- Wring the most possible value from consultant weeks.
- Develop internal capability to plan and lead kaizen activity.
- Use each engagement to get to deeper and more advanced levels.

Team Leadership

When a kaizen team is initially proposed, one of the members should be designated as the team leader. This is the person who is responsible for:

- Ensuring other team members are notified and available for the duration of the activity.
- Ensuring the logistical support (room, work area, etc) is in place for the activity.
- Ensuring the people in the area to be affected are aware that the activity will be taking place, and generally what the objectives are.
- During the event, being the “go-to” person for gaining internal logistical support.
- Ensuring that the *company* captures some of the expertise and knowledge of the consultant, beyond simply getting the short term objectives met.

Although it helps, it is not *necessary* that this person be full-time in this role. A sharp supervisor or manufacturing engineer is ideal.

The Importance of Continuity

On Monday morning, a competent consultant is first going to assess the experience, knowledge and capability of the team members, and begin the process with the logical next step for them.

If the team members do not understand what the word “kaizen” means, or what a “kaizen event” is, then these things must be explained, and the education is very basic.

The more prepared the team members are at the start of the event, the deeper the consultant can go into advanced techniques, thus transferring knowledge and experience to the company.

Reaching this point is a developmental process, and one of ensuring continuity. Each time the consultant visits, the company should be positioned to develop their internal skills to another level.



P.O. Box 7
Snohomish, WA 98291
info@kaizenadvantage.com
206-414-9801

Without this preparation, the company is essentially covering the same basic ground each and every time, as there is no chance to build upon work that has already been done.

An experienced *internal* kaizen team leader is key to building on prior events.

Developing Kaizen Leaders

Many companies who are pursuing kaizen and lean production strategies develop a Kaizen Promotion Office (KPO) with dedicated full time members. While this is not entirely necessary, it does work as a conduit to bring depths of knowledge into the company.

The outside consultant's job is then to fully develop these team members and continuously improve their capabilities with each visit.

The KPO is also a place where high-potential line leaders can be temporarily assigned so that they can develop skills for continuous improvement that they can apply when they return to another assignment.

Thus, many KPOs tend to have a small cadre of long-term professionals, and a rotating group on 6-12 month assignments. This is not the only model, we can discuss others, some simpler, others more advanced.

If the company chooses *not* to staff a KPO, there are other viable alternatives. Manufacturing engineers and industrial engineers are ideal candidates for adding a deep kaizen skill set. But the need for continuity remains. Until a kaizen team leader has been through about six to ten weeks of mentored experience, his capabilities and confidence are limited.

Each time an outside consultant is dealing *only* with first-time people, an crucial and valuable opportunity that you are paying for is lost.

Beyond Kaizen Events

The Toyota Production System is actually the Toyota Management System.

Kaizen events are one of several effective tools for getting the basic mechanics into place. However for those results to sustain, leaders must develop their own processes and their own standard work.

Although leaders need to have thorough knowledge of the lean tools, the skill set for daily management and leadership activities is different than the one for leading technical implementation of the tools.

This is yet another reason to have higher-level leaders intimately associated with kaizen activity and other consultant visits. Even at the beginning, basic levels of implementation, a competent lean consultant is going to begin to teach those leaders how to interact with people in the new process in ways that continue the progress made during the event itself.

Without this interaction, the results and gains *will* erode significantly. With this interaction, the improvements will continue, and the organization will continue to learn.

Recommendations

Develop a core cadre of kaizen leaders who are on the point of *every* interaction with outside consultants.

When outside consultants are guiding kaizen event teams:

Ensure every kaizen event team has a leader who is responsible for the success of the team and the interaction with the consultant.

Strive to engage more than one team during the time consultants are on-site. A competent consultant can assist between two and four kaizen teams *if* those teams have their own leaders as above.

Strive to have mid-level leaders spend as much time with the consultant as possible, possibly even shadowing him as he teaches the teams. Take in as much as possible, engage him in conversation.

Schedule the consultant's time, don't just leave him out there on his own. Even if you are being subsidized, treat this time for what is being paid to have it.

Prior to the event, have the team leaders engage the consultant for advice and guidance for their planning and preparation. It takes about three weeks for a kaizen event leader (part time) to prepare well for a kaizen event.

Conclusion

The key to successful kaizen is to understand it is not simply getting things done. It is a process of learning-by-doing. The team, and therefore the company, is learning not only the tools and tricks, but the key skill of *how* to see problems and systematically solve them.

"Dabbling" is not going to do it. This does not work if the leaders regard improvement as a transient activity before getting back to business as usual.

Success requires dedication, focus, and an approach of aggressively seeking out knowledge and opportunities to apply it. This means managing the experts.



P.O. Box 7
Snohomish, WA 98291
info@kaizenadvantage.com
206-414-9801

About Kaizen Advantage

While the tools have their place, true kaizen creates competitive advantage by making “people development” a core competency of the business, something that naturally happens as part of the normal work.

There is no reason that improvement should be limited to specially organized “events” or projects. It isn’t that way at Toyota, and it doesn’t have to be that way anywhere. I help line workers implement processes to improve *every day*.

I help leadership teams develop crisp improvement objectives that directly target the goals of the business, and build improvement into the daily work. Again, there is no reason that continuous improvement should be separate from doing business. In today’s world, *continuous* improvement must be *business as usual*.

Mark Rosenthal brings two decades of diverse, global experience teaching and implementing kaizen anywhere people are trying to get something done.