A kaizen event: an experience that can transform beliefs

by Jean Harvey

In 50 Words Or Less

- To achieve change and create a quality culture, an organization’s managers and employees must live through shared experiences that make them believe change is possible.
- Kaizen events are vehicles for change in that they create the transformational experiences necessary to allow organizations to fix broken processes or design new ones.

We change our beliefs when an experience proves something we held to be true is actually false.

To change a "good enough" culture to a quality culture, organizations must create the conditions for its managers and employees, individually and collectively, to have such experiences to realize the need for change.

Changing shared beliefs is one of the hardest things to orchestrate in any organization. Presentations, color slides and posters likely won’t work. But shared transformational experiences will.

Kaizen events, also called kaizen blitzes or workshops, are intensive drives by dedicated teams of workers to fix broken processes or design new ones. They are arguably the best change vehicles in the organizational change fleet, which includes Six Sigma projects, workouts and process management teams, among others.1

As shown near the top of Figure 1, kaizen teams typically spend a full week or two applying a rigorous method to a process that has been previously selected and scoped by management.2

Figure 1

When the team members sit together around a table at the outset of a kaizen event, most participants believe they know what the problem is and what is required to fix it. The solution they have in mind normally involves changing what some other person does or does not do.

Team members are told that if they follow the method, they’ll surely find the right solution, agree on it and be empowered to implement the solution together. But in reality, even if they may not say so out loud, most participants are skeptical of the method and its ability to bring them to an agreed-upon solution.

If the team does find the right solution, the once-skeptical team members may change their beliefs about the method and join in the effort for change by implementing the solution. But if they don’t find the right solution, the team members’ original beliefs are reinforced, and often they play an active role in derailing the change initiative.

A successful kaizen workshop can help a team discover the right solution to a problem, and team members can become supporters and movers of the required actions to operate a successful organizational turnaround.

The recipe for kaizen
As vehicles for organizational change, *kaizen* events embody a complex recipe of human, social, cultural and technical elements required for durable changes to be made in an organization’s processes.

There are five different outputs of a well-run *kaizen* workshop:

1. A new process, capable of contributing to the organization’s success.
2. Workers and managers transformed by the experience.
3. A team with a shared vision and a sense of ownership for the new way of doing things.
4. Well-scoped improvement opportunities discovered by the team for future *kaizen* workshops.
5. Future leaders who have emerged from the *kaizen* workshop.

**Putting the pieces together**

Most customer-focused companies understand and integrate the notions of customer experience and what some people call customer moments of truth.

For example, we sell something to customers by convincing them they will get a better experience from us than from our competitors. That’s only a promise, though. Customers will only truly know the benefits, and thus the value, of what we sell when they actually use our product or service.

Those precise moments of use—when customers realize what they bought and compare it with what was promised—are called moments of truth. All too often, they uncover overstatements, if not the outright lies, in the sales pitch.

When top management tells the organization it knows what’s wrong with the company and what’s required to get it back on track, this is also a sales pitch. At that point, executives are asking employees and managers to trust them and buy into their new way of improving processes.

But the best sales pitch will only get employees to give the new method a try. In time, the trial will generate employee moments of truth, during which they will make up their own minds.

The bigger the stretch in belief that is required of employees, the tougher the test for the new approach, and the deeper and longer lasting the potential negative effects of the moments of truth. If the moments of truth reveal manipulative behavior on the part of management, the resulting cynicism will become a major stumbling block to future change.

*Kaizen* workshops are about scripting, choreographing and orchestrating employee and managerial moments of truth. The theatrical metaphor is intentional. It takes empathy and anticipatory capability about the effects that various sequences of actions, images or sound effects are likely to have on viewers.

The online sidebar, "*Lessons From a Master,*" compares facilitating a *kaizen* event to directing a movie by drawing from the experiences of Francis Ford Coppola, director of "The Godfather." The movie director must have a profound understanding of the characters and predict how they would react under various circumstances to piece the scenes together in a way that will be most impactful for viewers.

**Online-only content**

**Lessons From a Master**

In "*The Making of the Godfather,*" director Francis Ford Coppola provides some insightful glimpses into the roles and challenges facing those who want to create memorable experiences.

Because the saga of three movies spans 18 years, Coppola was asked what he thought was the essence of his role in the making of the series. "I own the emotions of the Corleone family," he answered.

Coppola explained that the central role of the director is to understand the profound nature and inner feelings of the characters, and predict how they would react under various circumstances. Ultimately, he said, an experience—any experience—is about emotions. The director must have the sensitivity to get under the skin of participants and understand what’s required to induce the desired reaction, he explained. In other words, he or she must be the CEO—the chief emotion owner—of the experience.

In another section of the same piece, Coppola mentioned that a few weeks before the premiere of "The Godfather II,"
the film’s creators held preliminary screenings of the movie. The movie seemed to be a failure. That may sound surprising today, because we now know the movie was a resounding success. You are left to wonder what they could have possibly done in a few weeks to fix a movie that had taken so many resources and so much talent and time to put together. Maybe get Robert de Niro to come back to do a new take for a couple of scenes?
In fact, they conducted focus groups to understand the reaction of the audience—in other words, they obtained data to ascertain the facts. In the movie, flashbacks between different life stages of the godfather are used. For example, the film switches back and forth from the 5-year-old Vito Andolini in a Sicilian village to a young mobster fighting for turf in Little Italy. Data showed the audience just did not get it.

Coppola realized this was because people lost track due to the film’s going back and forth too many times between story lines. After the problem was diagnosed, the solution was easy: Reduce the number of flashbacks and alternate less frequently between epochs. By simply stitching several sequences, the film transformed from a failure into a vibrant viewing experience. —J.H.

Reference


This analogy shows the delicate nature of an experience: The line separating success from failure is tenuous. It also shows rigor or evidence-based management is an essential complement to creativity in a successful experience and that you should not expect to be perfect at the first trial or throw in the towel when you are not. A slight time lag or change of intonation can produce a different effect that spoils the moment. It takes a good story (such as Mario Puzo’s book, The Godfather), a good screenplay, the right actors and stage props, and—above all—masterful directing to make the movie experience come together. Qual

ity professionals also have a good story to tell: Quality culture, together with its supporting elements, really works. The kaizen event is the inspiration for the screenplay. It has been field tested and honed through decades of experimentation in a wide variety of environments and cultures.

A kaizen workshop consists of four generic stages, shown in the top level of Figure 1:

1. Project selection, definition, measurement and planning.
2. The workshop itself (one or more teams, typically working full time for one week).
3. Follow-through on the implementation, which involves the entire organization.
4. Control and sustenance of the gains realized.

The intense workshop week, shown in the middle level of Figure 1 consists of the launch, diagnosis, prescription (solution) and the initial stages of implementation. Ten moments of truth, including “trust” and “vision,” are shown along this timeline in the bottom level of Figure 1.

Staging the event

Figure 2 is a flowchart showing what the major players do. Executives scope a project to fix, improve or design a cross-functional process, and ensure executive involvement and support.

![Figure 2](image_url)

The process owner is selected during the initial phase. He or she takes over where the executive committee leaves off. This individual consults with managers in all areas with a stake in the process to ensure a proper team mandate is produced to put together a project team and to define the project.
When the process comes to life during the workshop, the process owner’s job is to keep it alive and continuously improving.

If the kaizen workshop were a play or a movie, the process owner would be the producer, the facilitator would be the director, and the team would be the cast. The facilitator brings theory to bear when the time is right or lets it emerge on its own, contributing just the required touch to make it fit the facts and broaden its applicability.

At first, peers and managers are the audience, but they join the cast at the implementation phase as they become active players in the transformation.

The cast works mostly backstage, under the guidance of the director, with a few key appearances by the producer. The producer and the director (see the first triangle in Figure 2, from left to right) first explain the play and parts to the cast members. The cast members make three critical stage appearances (the other triangles) in front of concerned peers and managers: to present and discuss the diagnosis (triangle 2), the solution (triangle 3) and the implementation plan (triangle 4).

The director facilitates these lively encounters, ensuring a level playing field for the exchanges, thereby reinforcing evidence-based management at the expense of hierarchy and bureaucracy.

Managing the moments

Figure 3 flows from the previous figures. It shows 10 activities of a kaizen team, organized around an inner timeline as each new workshop goes through the same sequence. A summary description of the associated moments of truth is formulated in the first person from the team’s perspective. Failure modes, effects, causes and advice for each moment of truth also are shown in Table 1.

Let’s explore the 10 moments of truth—what they are, what role they play, how they could fail and ways to avoid that fate.

1. Trust. “I trust management when they say this initiative is important and that we are empowered to fix this and ensure it stays fixed.”

The initiative will never get off the ground unless a minimum threshold of trust is achieved. An organization with a long
tradition of manipulative management must first take a hard look at its practices and fundamental beliefs about employee capabilities and attitudes, and at what is expected of employees and due to them.

This is no easy task. All too often, only dire circumstances will create a shock strong enough to bring the executive team to take such a hard look at its culture.

2. Dissatisfaction. "Do we really work that way? I would never have thought. We can’t carry on like this."

Recognition that something significant is inadequate is a prerequisite for change. When management targets a process for improvement, it recognizes a problem or an opportunity. But it should not assume the workers involved in the process will agree.

People do not change when you tell them they should. They change when they tell themselves, "I must." Diagnostic tools contribute to making and sharing the case for change. Creating the right conditions for the team to discover the problem is much better use of management’s time than preaching.

3. Togetherness. "I was convinced it was entirely their fault. Now, I see we are not blameless. No one area can solve this on its own."

Only a dedicated cross-functional team using appropriate tools can reach a shared understanding of the totality of a process and the interdependency of its components.

Because process workers typically lack such an understanding, they are apt to perform in ways that might appear fine from the target area's point of view but are, in fact, detrimental to the overall process. The original adversarial relationship slowly gives way to an emerging "we" feeling.

4. Understanding. "This is what’s wrong with this process. It was right there for us to see, except we never took the time."

After the "we" feeling among the process workers is realized, the diagnosis is really brought into focus and an appropriate method with the right set of tools plays a decisive role. Each tool deals with a different aspect of the process or uses a different angle to look at it. Just as the image is gradually revealed when you are putting together a jigsaw puzzle, a shared diagnosis appears as the team uses a battery of tools.

5. Empowerment. "We have found the problem, and we have data and a convincing argument to back it up."

The team presents the diagnosis to managers and colleagues. All questions and comments are welcome. Everyone must commit to listen without defending. Hard questions are especially welcome, as long as they are formulated with respect—exempt from blame and supported by facts. Valid points are duly noted by the team, which promises and delivers follow-up and feedback.

The process owner concludes the session, saying: "If anyone else has any additional comments to make or facts to bring to the team’s attention, speak now or forever hold your peace. Tomorrow, we move on to the solutions phase."

6. Changing. "There are many ways to do things, and improving what we have is easy. We are creative when given time, context and support."

Up to that point, the team has not had any impact on the way things are done in the organization. Switching from the analytical to the action mindset is an important transition for the team to make. Change affects people, some of whom are likely to resist and complain. Results are never guaranteed. Some team members may have second thoughts and become gun-shy.

7. Leading. "Criticizing is easy. Leading is difficult, but it is also much more stimulating and rewarding."

After the team completes the prescription phase, it shares its vision of the new process. The team members become the leaders and champions of the new initiative. As they present this vision, tell how it is going to work, respond to questions and explain what must take place to make it a reality, they are working to give everyone the same mental image. This is a central force for change.

8. Belief. "It actually works. I would never have thought ..."

Seeing the process perform at the desired level is the proof. It changes beliefs about the nature of processes, the
potential for improvement, and how that potential can be tapped. It not only affects team members, but also their co-workers and managers. In short, it is the stuff culture change is made of.

9. Discipline. "It’s so easy to get back to the old habits. This discipline thing is really demanding."

The most difficult part starts when implementation is complete. When the team and the support structures are disbanded, there is a tendency to go back to business as usual.

10. Vision. "This is how we can become the best. It makes my job much more stimulating and rewarding."

The organization must leverage success to make explicit the vision it has of its culture. Without common references, such discussions can become abstract and detached from reality. The workshop is now a shared experience to which everyone can relate. It can be used to clarify meaning.

As the workshop unfolds play by play, the organization lives the experience in the here and now. As much as it might have been explained before, each participant is driven by the instructions and coaching he or she receives constantly. It is only afterward, given the required time and proper guidance, that fundamental lessons can be isolated and their implications for the future made explicit.

Changing a culture

We tend to think of a kaizen event as primarily a method or a technical exercise. When it fails or has only limited success, we might blame the tools. Discussions about culture change tend to be fuzzy wishful thinking, with nobody really knowing what concrete actions to take to make it happen.

The kaizen event is a social vehicle for process change. Creating collective experiences capable of changing beliefs brings clarity and focus to such discussions.

Culture has changed when a critical mass of people in an organization change some significant shared belief. A kaizen event is a transformative experience, a series of well-orchestrated events and a powerful lever for moving the culture in the desired direction.

While the organization may need outside help to get started and learn the ropes, this is far too important to be outsourced to consultants. The core capabilities to manage change must be internal, as it is an organization’s only sustainable source of competitive advantage.

Note

This article was adapted from Jean Harvey’s book, Complex Service Delivery Processes: Strategy to Operations, second edition, published by ASQ Quality Press in 2011.

References


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