

Kaizen

We can see clearly now!

Laoucine Kerbache and his co-authors set out to assess the use of the Japanese concept of *Kaizen*, considered a key element in the competitiveness of Japanese companies. Their research led them to propose a classification that may help academics and managers to use different *Kaizen* perspectives and tools more wisely.



Laoucine Kerbache

BIOGRAPHY

Laoucine Kerbache joined HEC Paris in 2000. Previously, he taught and held various positions at ESC-Rennes and other institutions abroad. He holds a PhD, an MSc, and a BSc in Industrial Engineering and Operations Research from the University of Massachusetts (USA).

Kaizen, did you say *Kaizen*? This term, created by the combination of two Japanese words (Kai and Zen, which respectively mean “change” and “good” in Japanese), is well-known in the management world but its meaning is not always clear. “Masaaki Imai defined it as a means of continuous improvement in work life, as well as in personal and social life,” says Laoucine Kerbache, who decided to find out what *Kaizen* is really about while he was a visiting professor at ESADE in Barcelona. Regarded as the key to competitiveness of Japanese companies since the 1980s, this gradual and smooth process is based on small, concrete improvements, which are simple, inexpensive, and made continuously on a daily basis.

KAIZEN FOR EVERYONE

Today, in business, *Kaizen* comes in a multiple methodologies and techniques such as Gemba-*Kaizen* workshops, Lean-*Kaizen* in Six Sigma, Office *Kaizen*, *Kaizen* Teian, *Kaizen* Flash, and *Kaizen* Blitz. Popularized in the West, *Kaizen* Blitz, for example, aims for radical change in a short amount of time. “With the adoption of Just-in-Time, Lean Production, and Six Sigma, American and European companies copied the concept of *Kaizen* but with many ambiguities and inconsistencies,” says Kerbache. “The literature review that we carried out reveals the importance of clarifying this concept, especially for operations management of products and services.”

THREE PERSPECTIVES AND A FEW GUIDING PRINCIPLES

Kerbache and his co-authors identified three different perspectives or visions, which each include a set of principles and techniques. “The first considers *Kaizen* as a management philosophy and advocates for continuous improvement to enhance organizational performance and progress,” he says. “In the second, *Kaizen* is a component of Total Quality Management, which focuses on responding to customer needs and business objectives. In the third perspective, *Kaizen* is considered a series of methodologies and techniques to reduce waste, which is the vision developed by Lean Management.” By comparing these three perspectives, Kerbache and his co-authors highlight the nuances in *Kaizen* as well as the overlap and duplication that can exist within and become exacerbated by environment and culture. “When it comes to implementation, some things do not fit neatly into the different perspectives; we do not know if they fall under a management philosophy, total quality, or a methodology like Lean. So, the risk is great to mix approaches and to implement an inappropriate action plan, using ineffective tools. This is the case of most big failures we have seen, especially when *Kaizen* is used to support a sudden change.”

WHEN KAIZEN GOES WRONG

When it is well understood and well managed, *Kaizen* can give outstanding results. This has been

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APPLICATIONS IN COMPANIES

The work of Kerbache and his co-authors led to a classification of *Kaizen* that can be useful for both researchers and managers who introduce and develop *Kaizen* in their companies, no matter the size. “It will enable them to determine which *Kaizen* approach to adopt to support change,” he explains. “[The classification] helps to identify the right tools and to avoid engaging in *Kaizen* in the wrong way. For example, we want to educate leaders on the risk of using heavy artillery (Six Sigma, Lean, etc.) to introduce step-by-step improvements; these tools have been developed, rather, to support sudden, short-term change such as innovation introduction.”

the case with many companies in food, textile, and automotive industries. The most emblematic case is that of Toyota, but companies like Honda and Mazda have also benefited from the concept. Why do some Western companies like Chrysler have difficulties taking advantage of *Kaizen*? “The results obtained from using *Kaizen* at Chrysler were disappointing overall, because the method was only partially implemented. Change was supported using just some of the tools necessary for *Kaizen*. For example, machine and assembly line workers were hardly informed and solicited for the transformation project. But, in *Kaizen*, it is essential to empower and involve everyone, including operators and specialized workers. That is where most improvements materialize. If you take a ‘top-down’ approach (directional control) to *Kaizen*, it will never work.” Moreover, since the “bottom-up” approach (participatory control) is often practiced in VSBs and SMBs, the authors are surprised that *Kaizen* is not more widespread in these companies. ■

改善

Characters represent “kai” and “zen,” which respectively mean “change” and “good” in Japanese.

METHODOLOGY

The researchers carried out a comprehensive literature review of databases, articles, and books written by academics and practitioners who are experts in *Kaizen*. They then methodically analyzed and categorized all the literature on *Kaizen*, which they grouped into three different perspectives.

Based on an interview with Laoucine Kerbache, professor of Supply Chain Management in the departement of Operations Management & Information Technology, Associated Dean and Director of the HEC PhD Program, and the article “Thoughts on *kaizen* and its evolution: Three different perspectives and guiding principles” (*International Journal of Lean Six Sigma*, vol. 2, No. 4, pp 288-308, 2011), co-written with Manuel F. Suárez-Barraza and Juan Ramis-Pujol.