The 30-year Journey of Kaizen Institute

It has been 30 years since Masaaki Imai wrote „Kaizen: The Key to Japan’s Competitive Success“ (McGraw Hill 1986), and the founding of Kaizen Institute. Future historians will no doubt mark this date in 1986 as one of the turning points in the progression of quality, productivity, and labour-management relations. Indeed, we believe that KAIZEN®, along with information technology and the globalization of supply chains and services, are the top three economic innovations of the 20th century and these have made a lasting positive effect on the world economy into succeeding centuries.

In 1985 almost nobody knew what KAIZEN was, personal computers were only just starting to open new horizons for productivity and Cell phones was a breaking technology. Back in 1985, there was a fear by many western industrialists and business commentators, of Japan taking over the US economy. Many suspected the Japanese of somehow cheating, or possessing a cultural secret that made their rapid post-war success possible. The answer was much simpler: slow and steady continuous improvement following the scientific method; this is what we call KAIZEN and it remains foreign and difficult for many to practice even until this day.

In the beginning the aims of Kaizen Institute were humble ones. As Masaaki Imai travelled the world sharing what he had learned about KAIZEN and business excellence from Toyota and other companies, he saw that people were hungry for more education. He needed to develop more teachers to spread knowledge about KAIZEN more quickly. The result was the formation of Kaizen Institute in Switzerland as an education company in 1985.

As Kaizen Institute expanded rapidly across Europe and the United States, it naturally became a management consulting company because of the practical and hands-on nature of KAIZEN teaching; KAIZEN cannot be understood without doing. In the decade that followed the publication of Masaaki Imai’s first book, a growing number of leaders read it and sent their executives to Japan to study from the best examples of KAIZEN. They brought back commonsense ideas and KAIZEN management systems, which they put into practice, often with the assistance of Kaizen Institute.

Seeing how serious many of these companies were in learning about KAIZEN, Masaaki Imai took some time out from his traveling and speaking to write is follow-up book „Gemba Kaizen (McGraw Hill 1997)“, a Commonsense Low-cost Approach to Management. This book proved to be even more influential than the original. It featured over 20 case studies from companies worldwide who had adopted KAIZEN. Readers were rewarded with a more comprehensive and in-depth explanation of how KAIZEN was to be made part of a company’s management system. „Gemba Kaizen“ brought to light the importance of the role of the focus on the gemba, or the frontline, and how businesses could be transformed by focusing on the customer and by empowering the people closest to the front lines to make change, bottom up.

„Gemba Kaizen“ also recovered Training Within Industry (TWI) from the dustbin of history, explaining the key role that TWI played in Japan’s post-war rebuilding, in Toyota’s frontline management development, and ultimately in the development of KAIZEN. The book emphasized the gemba as the source of value within a company, and how the management team must reorient itself to support and enable continuous improvement by everyone.
In its second decade, Kaizen Institute became a truly global company, expanding to India, Africa, Latin America, opening locations in more than 20 countries. As the global community of Kaizen Institute consultants and teachers grew larger, this brought new languages, cultures, experiences and perspectives on how to teach KAIZEN worldwide. Clients also demanded a broader, more comprehensive and systematic way of applying KAIZEN to their business. This resulted in the development of the KAIZEN Management System (KMS) in 2006. Mature clients recognized the need to develop and certify larger numbers of in-house KAIZEN experts, a need Kaizen Institute answered by establishing the KAIZEN College approach to expert certification.

A decade later, more than 20’000 experts had been qualified worldwide and Kaizen Institute has expanded to more than 30+ business operations, based in various cities within Europe, the Americas, Asia-Pasific, Middle East and Africa.

In 2015 Kaizen Institute celebrates 30 years of history.

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