

# Improve, Don't Tamper With Processes

By  
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A core part of my career has been in using the principles of the Toyota Production System (TPS) to continuously improve operations for which I was responsible, and teaching these principles to others. Within TPS, the idea of continuous improvement is called *kaizen*. Many companies use a team engagement process called *kaizen events* to achieve aggressive, focused objectives in very short time-frame (often 2 – 5 days). As part of learning the kaizen process, there is a lot of brief training, followed by “learning by doing” as teams implement improvement ideas to achieve these aggressive goals. Unfortunately, very little time is spent on the proper pronunciation of the word kaizen.

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Recently, I was preparing for some discussions with a new client who was looking for support with their new lean initiatives, including using kaizen events as an implementation approach. My main contact there is a friend I've known for years, who mispronounced kaizen (which rhymes with “By Ben”) as kaizan (or ky-zahn). I began to wonder what kaizan actually means, and if proper pronunciation matters or not. I sent a quick e-mail to a friend, Art Smalley (see him at ArtOfLean.com) who worked for years at Toyota in Japan to see if he could settle the score for me. He came back with some interesting news.

While *Kaizen* is to change for the better, *kaizan* means to tamper with or falsify. Kaizan sounds like something that might land a crooked bookkeeper in jail, and is definitely NOT the same as a philosophy of continuous improvement. I decided right then and there that I would have a personal mission to help people pronounce kaizen correctly. Here's what I've done to help achieve this mission.

First, I have actually built into my training on kaizen events the definitions of kaizen and kaizan, and state: “The discipline of kaizen begins with pronouncing the word correctly.” This usually gets me a few chuckles and comments, such as, “well, I guess we don't want to do kaizan here!” I even had someone recently make reference to some data that they know people were mis-reporting by saying, “they are practicing kaizan”.

At the end of a visit with my clients where I help them to achieve their kaizen event goals, I make a few comments to the teams to make sure they solidify the principles they

learned and implemented during the prior week. Recently, I used this opportunity to test my new students. I asked for a show of hands, “How many people think we had a great kaizan event this week?” Most people raised their hands. “OK, now how many people think we had a great **kaizen** event this week?” Upon hearing the second question, the crowd moans at being caught once again. “Please,” I repeat, “kaizan is something bad to do to your processes – you should practice kaizen.”

One client is considering making pins for any foul-mouthed team member to wear that say “NO Kaizan,” as a playful reminder. Another is thinking of collecting \$1 every time the word is pronounced incorrectly to build up enough cash for a kaizen party. I’ve even had team members poke fun at each other by telling the boss after hearing him say kaizan, “your ignorance is showing.” You might think that takes guts, but I believe once you know something to be correct, and someone who does not makes an error, you are responsible for fixing the error or else you are equally to blame for that error.

The interesting thing is that many people have formed the habit of saying the wrong word without ever knowing that what they were saying was incorrect. Well, now that we’ve spent a few minutes together, you know what is right. I can only assume that one who has learned the correct definition of kaizan and chooses to use that word does so intentionally, and is tampering with systems and falsifying data, rather than making true process improvement. My hope is that you will have the discipline to choose your vocabulary correctly, and that your actions echo your word choice.

***Pete Winiarski is the President of Win Enterprises, LLC, a consulting, coaching, and speaking company based in Connecticut. Pete also has a relationship with The George Group consulting company and is part of the leadership team for their Strategy to Execution Practice.***

***Pete has great experiences in line management and consulting roles at The Wiremold Company, Danaher, and McKinsey and Company. During his career, he has experienced the value of Strategic Goal Deployment in his line roles and with clients as a critical methodology to ensure strategic results. In helping to achieve strategic results, Pete has led, facilitated, or participated in well over a hundred kaizen events, and has conducted training for hundreds of people.***

***Additionally, Pete is an expert in personal goal achievement, and helps individuals reach their potential. Pete believes there is useful overlap between the individual and company goal achievement processes, and is working on a book that integrates these processes to help accelerate improvement in organizations. He has made a short eBook available for you on this topic at [www.WinEnterprisesLLC.com/ebook](http://www.WinEnterprisesLLC.com/ebook).***

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