

To Blitz or Not to Blitz

By Malcolm Jones, Productivity Europe

Kaizen Blitz seems on the face of it an oxymoron – if Kaizen is ‘continuous, unending improvement’, how can you ‘blitz’ it? Part of the answer may lie in the origin of the process, which is worth recalling.

‘**Kaizen Blitz**’ was brought to the West by Yoshiki Iwata, an ex-Toyota employee, who taught the **Toyota Production System** to Toyota’s suppliers. The Toyota learning approach is very experiential – Taiichi Ohno famously declined to discuss the theory of **TPS** with Shigeo Shingo – he was only interested in learning through application. The experiential model means that the learner is expected to follow the direction of the sensei, or master, and learn through the experience, until they are able to apply **TPS** principles themselves.

Productivity Inc brought this approach to the USA in 1988, when we engaged Mr Iwata, then a private consultant, and translated his material into English. In order to teach **TPS** in the West, Mr Iwata asked us to provide a host company, where they could work on a real production line. What Mr Iwata was teaching was how to use standard work combination sheets to design **one piece flow cells**, an integral part of **TPS**. The event lasted five days, and we originally called it ‘Five Days and One Night’, the one night referring to the amount of sleep people should expect in a very intense process.

I am not sure how it became to be called the ‘**Kaizen Blitz**’. Mr Iwata would routinely refer to kaizen when talking about improvement, but I suspect the **Kaizen Blitz** name may have come about when Mr Iwata subsequently presented the same programme for Mr Imai’s Kaizen Institute, Mr Imai being the interpreter and translator who wrote the original book called Kaizen, and used it for the name of his consulting company. The process was also taken up by the Association for Manufacturing Excellence (AME) who I believe registered the term as a trademark.

Many **lean manufacturing** consultants and trainers, especially those who learnt about TPS in the late eighties and early nineties, have themselves been through the **Kaizen Blitz** learning experience, either with Mr Iwata’s group or at some remove from them. The original machining cell example used by Mr Iwata to teach standard

work combination sheets can be found in many a one piece flow cell design manual, including our own (as initial translators we have some claim to the copyright).

But what does the [Kaizen Blitz](#) teach us about improvement? One lesson is 'just do it'. One characterisation of [TPS](#) by a Japanese authority defines its strength as Routinised Methods, Routinised Problem Solving and Experimentation. These last two are the foundation of the [Kaizen Blitz](#) – a combination of the use of a standard Kaizen method – the standard work combination sheet – and practical experimentation. There is also the emphasis on defining a standard method for the new layout, hence standard work combination sheet. The original [Kaizen Blitz](#) also teaches us the value of [one piece flow](#) in lead time, cost and inventory reduction.

One Piece Flow Cells are however a very narrow definition of Kaizen, which is a powerful organisational culture. Developing this culture is a challenge, which has been undertaken by many companies, some of whom have followed alternative approaches such as Kaizen Teian, Improvement through Suggestions, which is promoted by the Japan Human Relations Association.

We at [Productivity](#) developed other Blitz events – **Visual Factory**, a 5S [Kaizen Blitz](#), and **Maintenance Miracle**, an Autonomous Maintenance [TPM](#) Blitz. These are very practical learning experiences, but have to be seen as that, learning experiences, not a blueprint for implementation.

More systemic approaches to [Lean Manufacturing](#) have brought us to techniques such as [Value Stream Mapping](#), developed by Mike Rother. [VSM](#) looks at a whole value chain, not just a single cell or production line; the criticism of cell based blitzes being that they simply move the inventory or bottleneck elsewhere. But there is a chicken and egg here – in order to get flow throughout the value stream you need to connect a network of flow cells. And in order to develop flow cells you need standard operating methods. [VSM](#) can define an ideal, the future state, but to achieve it you need to do detailed work on individual cells and operations, the way Mr Iwata and others taught us.

Some of the constraints identified by a [VSM](#) exercise may not be flow/inventory issues. They may be quality problems or machine

efficiency issues. This is where TQC and [TPM](#) techniques can be more effective.

My preferred starting point is [5S](#), simply to give visibility and to develop standards. It is also an authentic Kaizen approach, in that [5S](#) improvements have to be developed and owned by the natural work teams in production (it is virtually impossible to [5S](#) someone else's work area).

In an engineered product environment I would then do a value stream map to identify the constraints to reducing lead times and inventories, using this to identify Kaizen projects, be they flow, quality or efficiency issues. True [Kaizen](#) would then be the team based unending elimination of these issues and constraints, allowing us to approach perfect flow, an ideal which can only be approached without limit, never reached.

A [Kaizen](#) culture can only be developed by involving people in making improvements in their own work areas, responding to the Quality, Cost and Delivery needs of their customers, internal and external. A blitz illustrates just how great the opportunity can be – people see the scale of defects and waste, but the blitz process needs to be supported by ongoing team problem solving. There are many processes for this – **8D**, the problem solving method of many automotive manufacturers, or the TQ story, [CEDAC](#) (Cause and Effect Diagram with Addition of Cards) or other root cause problem solving approaches.

True [Kaizen](#) is ongoing cultural change, not just a blitz, but a blitz can open people's eyes and demonstrate the value of a standard improvement process and experimentation through a plan, do, check, act cycle.

Keywords

Kaizen blitz, kaisen blitz, kaisen, kaisen blitz, Toyota production system, tps, shigeo shingo, yoshiki iwata, one piece flow, lean manufacturing, lean manufacturing training, visual factory, 5S, maintenance miracle, value stream mapping, VSM, 8D, CEDAC, cause and effect diagram with addition of cards, improve productivity

Biography

Malcolm Jones founded Productivity Europe in 1989 to develop support and facilitation services in World Class Manufacturing

techniques. He learnt from Japanese masters such as Shigeo Shingo and the Total Productivity group at the Japan Management Association, and has edited three books on World Class Manufacturing techniques and practices.

Productivity Europe are leaders in lean manufacturing training and consulting in the UK. Our experienced consultants help you establish a World Class Manufacturing vision through Lean Manufacturing, Total Quality (Six Sigma) and Total Productive Maintenance training.