



## Kaizen: Lost in Translation

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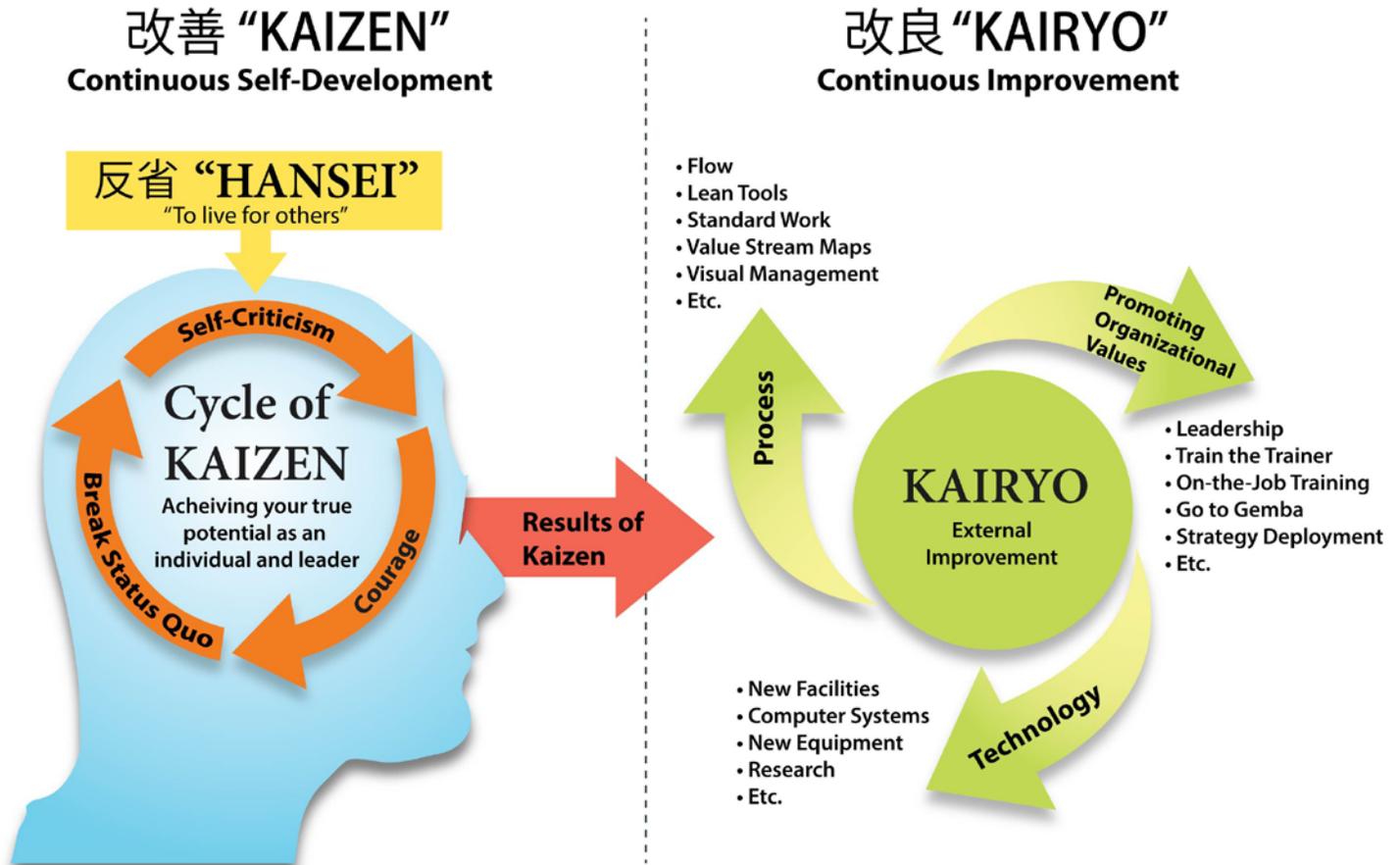
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Japanese improvement techniques have been emulated across the globe for decades, and none carries more cultural weight than the theory of Kaizen. When I expose Western leaders to Lean practices in Japan, they often express that they have come away with a better understanding of “true Kaizen.” They are clearly witnessing something in Japanese society that is not carried over in mainstream guides to Lean. Despite what you may have been told, Kaizen does not just mean “continuous improvement.” “Change for the better” is a part of Kaizen, to be sure, but there is much more to it. Many experts might show you the kanji (Japanese letters “改善”) that make up the word Kaizen and explain their composition and history, but this would be a lesson in etymology rather than an exploration of what Kaizen actually means. I feel that an over-emphasis of the word “Kaizen” has distracted people from the theory of Kaizen. The theory of Kaizen cannot be contained in a single phrase, so instead I will walk you through what it means to those who have experienced its benefits, myself included.

### The Lost Meaning of Kaizen

Over the years I have received ongoing training with Hitoshi Yamada, who was the foremost protégé of Taiichi Ohno. Mr. Ohno applied the theory of Kaizen to help Toyota reach unprecedented levels of success. Toyota is just one case study that illustrates the power of Kaizen. I have the honor of carrying on Ohno's mission and legacy, with full approval from his protégé. “Continuous improvement” is not the definition of Kaizen, but rather the result of Kaizen. The literal translation of “continuous improvement” in Japanese is “Kairyo 改良.” This is something you achieve externally through material and financial investments or relying on techniques of others to solve your problems. Kaizen is more personal, and it occurs within your own mind. Kaizen could be better translated as “continuous self-development.” Here we can see a clear distinction between the two concepts: improvement and self-development. This is why, even in North America, Toyota employees often say “Kaizen” in its original Japanese, rather than attempting to translate it into English.

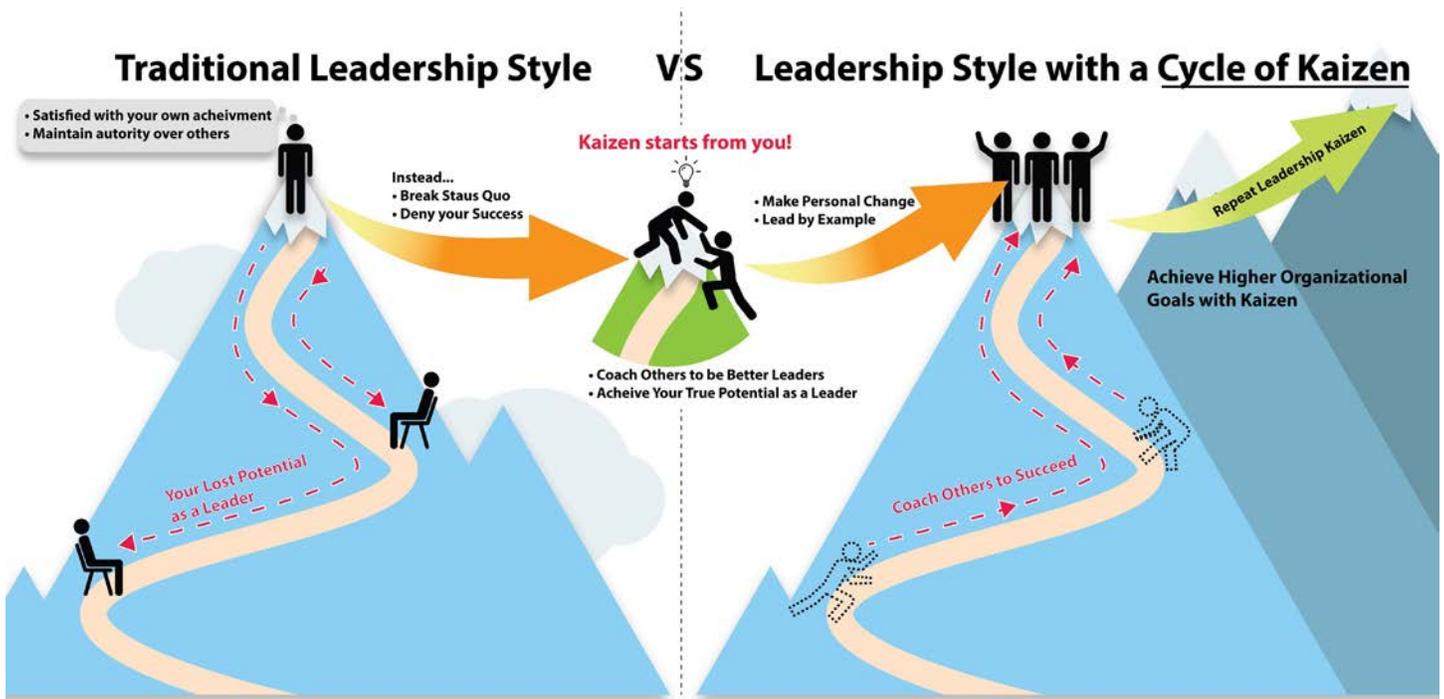
Continuous improvement is an external force, and Kaizen is an internal force. New equipment, facilities, or other investments in methodologies might be improvements, but they are not Kaizen. Kaizen is a process in your mind, of reviving your innate potential as a human being by developing strong willpower to break the status quo. Before this definition of Kaizen starts to sound like ambiguous mysticism, let's look at how Kaizen is actually achieved. This is not a simple matter of positive thinking; in some ways it's quite the opposite. In order to achieve Kaizen, you have to hold yourself accountable and acknowledge your struggles as well as the negative emotions they bring about. This is far from defeatism; it's a starting point for change. Without accepting this internal struggle you will not have the motivation to avoid defeat in the future.



## Kaizen as Self-Development

It is common in Japanese schools and businesses for people to gather at the end of the day to celebrate success, but also to recognize areas that can be improved, even if everything seems to have gone very well. This practice is known as “hansei 反省.” It is the practice of self-criticism that fuels Kaizen. Hansei inspires you to always see room for self-development. In an interview with The Red Bulletin, mountaineer Dani Arnold discussed the importance of self-criticism in his path to success. The mindset that he describes is a great example of hansei in action. In fact, the image of a mountain brings to mind a good analogy: Imagine you have just reached the summit of a very tall mountain. Simple positive thinking would lead you to see this as success. But what if there are higher peaks beyond the summit that you only discover once you get there? Do you have the courage to accept this new challenge, or will you remain satisfied with the status quo? In order to reach the next peak, you must first acknowledge that you have not achieved the highest goal. Simple positive thinking, without self-criticism, can lead to stagnation of self-being. Only through self-criticism will you find the motivation to push yourself further. This is why hansei is such an important part of the Kaizen process. It is a simple science.





Kaizen is not a target; it is how you challenge your mindset. You must be courageous to reveal and accept the insecurities of yourself and others, but the energy generated from this practice is what fuels your development as a human being and a leader. Start by denying the satisfaction of your achievements, and challenge yourself to reach the higher goals that you can see on the horizon.

From the future book authored by Jun Nakamuro, *“Kaizen: Lost in Translation”*

