

## Interview with Masaaki Imai

# “Never be satisfied with the status quo!”

Interview by Herbert Lechner



## MASAAKI IMAI

Masaaki Imai, born in Tokyo in 1930, founded the Kaizen Institute in Switzerland in 1985 in order to help companies implement the Kaizen concept and the various systems and tools which are known today as lean management. In the last three decades, Masaaki Imai has written various books and articles, held lectures on Kaizen, quality management, lean and other similar management topics, advised global corporations and introduced Kaizen as a logical approach for continuous improvement on every continent.

☞ **For many managers, especially those in the west, “KAIZEN™” just means “lean production.” But isn’t it much more?**

Kaizen is a process, a way of living. Lean is the result of going on a journey of continuous improvement. At the Kaizen Institute, we like to say that lean is the result of applying Kaizen consistently.

☞ **You compare the “lean production” process in many companies with the Christopher Columbus Syndrome: “When he set off, he didn’t know where he was going; when he arrived, he didn’t know where he was; when he returned, he couldn’t say where he had been—and everything with loaned capital.” Can you give Columbus a map?**

Today’s CEOs appear to be just as courageous as Columbus because, out of the blue, they start with a corporate strategy without really knowing where they want to go with it. I personally think that the most important and urgent task for the CEOs of traditionally oriented companies is the decision to introduce lean production. Most CEOs continue to pass up this opportunity.

☞ **A significant part of Kaizen is optimizing the production process, the “flow” in other words. Isn’t it logistics that gains in significance for the entire process—both internally and externally—with that?**

Creating a brisk flow without friction is the first step in lean production.

☞ **Is it possible to say that Kaizen brings logistics from the manufacturing hall to the management floor?**

Flow should not apply only to the manufacturing sector, but to the service area, to the public sector and to all areas of industry, including office management for all of these branches.

☞ **“Go to gemba”—the place where production takes place—in order to find the problems. Do you think that many managers are not at all familiar with the process flows of their production lines?**

When we go to the production level—gemba, that’s where the real work and value creation takes place and observe the flow there, we immediately see that there is a problem that needs to be solved wherever there is a disturbance in the flow of production.

**Kaizen represents a challenge for the entire company. How can employees and management be motivated to follow this process?**

It is top management’s task to show its leadership through the integration of Kaizen as well as through lean management. If an organization wants to be lean, or is expecting to be so, then it has to apply Kaizen—every day, everywhere and with everyone involved.

**“One must imagine Sisyphus happy,” wrote the French author and Nobel Prize winner Albert Camus. Kaizen is a never-ending process. How can motivation be rekindled again and again?**

Daily business processes are performed according to fixed formulas that prescribe how the individual work steps must be executed. These rules, written down and placed in the production area, become standards. They represent the best, most efficient and safe pathway to execute the work. For successful production management, everything comes down to a single rule: Follow the standards and improve.

☞ **“Muda” is a very important word in Kaizen. Can you describe the problem? And is it true that “muda” changes throughout the entire process?**

Japanese kanji for improvement

Muda refers to everything that adds no value—meaningless activity. There are only two types of processes: those that create value for which customers pay, and those which have no value and for which no one pays. That’s why management must combat all forms of muda at all levels. There are seven types of muda, from over-production to idle time to production defects.

☞ **How does the Kaizen Institute advise and train companies of various industries and sizes worldwide?**

The consultants and trainers at the Kaizen Institute benefit from thousands of practical experiences in which they assist groups and organizations to make their own Kaizen and lean development in order to implement the power of Kaizen properly while successfully transmitting their knowledge and abilities. So that clients can begin their own Kaizen journeys.

☞ **Concentration on the most important! If one considers Japanese food, design, architecture, and so on, isn’t Kaizen a typical Japanese philosophy?**

Yes, the Kaizen approach was initiated in Japan, but it has developed into an international practice.

KAIZEN™  
at Interroll

KAIZEN™  
INSTITUTE

The Kaizen principle was introduced at the first Interroll factory in 2006. Five years later, the Interroll production system began in all plants. The most important successes which have meanwhile been achieved have been higher productivity, shorter setup times and turnaround times, less machinery down time, improved quality and enhanced employee participation in the change processes. Especially for the employees in the plants, these are linked to very important secondary effects: secure jobs, the possibility to structure their own work environment, and—not to be underestimated—recognition by other companies. Interroll has already undertaken one-week study trips twice to Japan, to the US and to Germany with about 20 employees for the purpose of implementing Kaizen.