

Kaizen Blitz: An Introduction and some words of caution

What is a Kaizen Blitz?

A Kaizen Blitz is a rapid improvement workshop designed to produce results/approaches to discrete process issues within a few days. It is a way for teams to carry out structured, but creative problem solving and process improvement, in a workshop environment, over a short timescale.

Why use it?

- “Conventional” Business Process Improvement Projects can stretch out over many weeks or months:
 - Teams can lose momentum
 - Senior management can lose interest
 - Results can take too long to come through
 - External Consultancy/Facilitation support can be expensive and extended
- With a Blitz, you get improvements within days:
 - High levels of commitment from those involved
 - A focus on practical, implementable solutions
 - Management commitment to implement quickly

Key features of a Blitz

Normally, it is a focussed five day event to deliver specific performance improvements (but it could be shorter than five days). Participants include all the right people to analyse the problem, develop improvement solutions and begin to implement them.

Management must commit to the time and resources required, and to empower the Blitz team to “do what is needed” to achieve improvements.

Tangible benefits are usually visible within the period of the Blitz and are certainly visible within weeks of the Blitz.

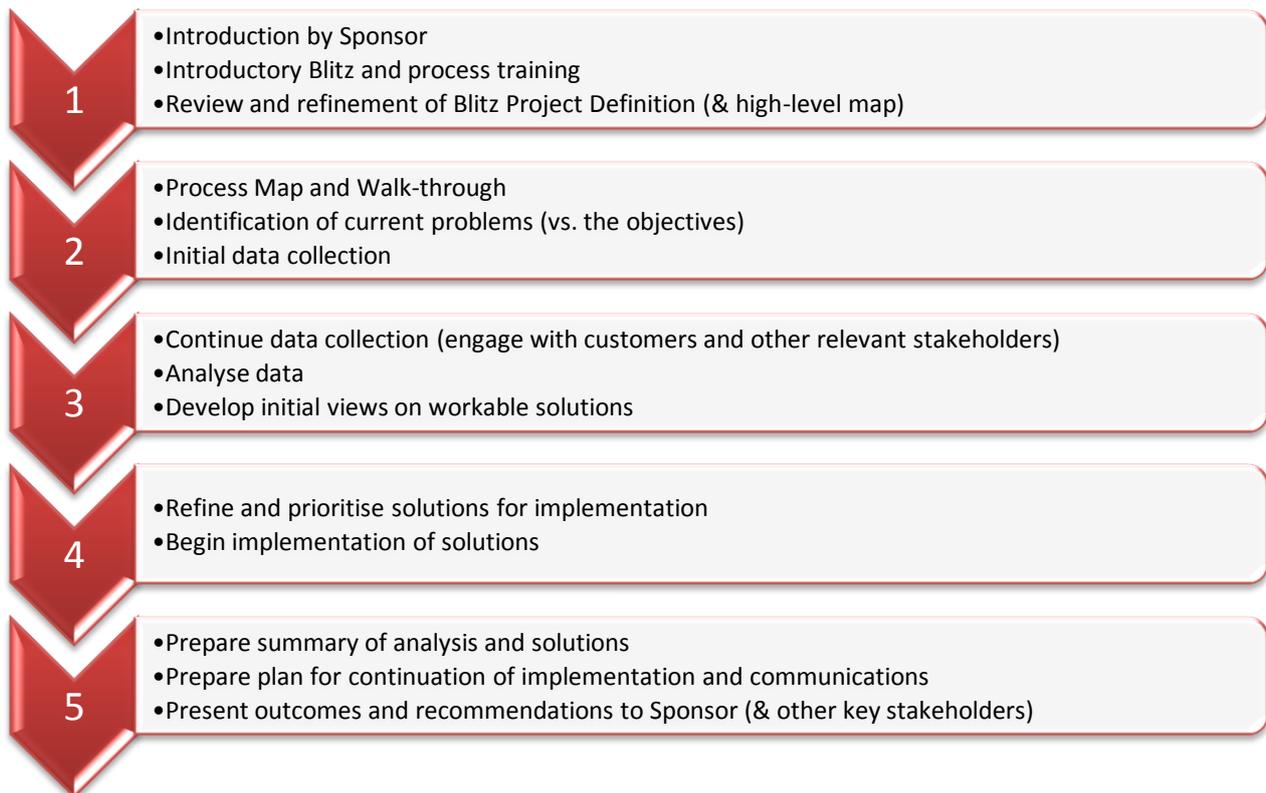
The three stages of a Kaizen Blitz

- Preparation
- The Blitz Event
- Follow-up

Preparation:

- Identify a senior management sponsor
- Define the improvements required and scope of the problem/process to be addressed, including:
 - Set SMART objectives
 - Identify any constraints
- Gather available data and process information that will need to be available during the Blitz
- Select and brief the Blitz team
- Brief any other key stakeholders

The Blitz Event (5 day example):



Follow-up:

- Continue with implementation actions for items not done during the Blitz
- Communicate process changes to stakeholders
- Coach managers/staff and complete “hand-over” to business as usual
- Measure impacts and benefits
- Sign-off achievements with Sponsor

Kaizen Blitz – some words of caution

A Kaizen Blitz is not a “silver bullet”. It has severe limitations when looking at extensive, complex, cross-functional systems where the chance of addressing true, systemic, root causes in a week is unlikely to be possible.

Wherever the process/problem can't be easily defined, or is associated with multiple root causes, a Blitz is unlikely to be of much use.

Lean thinking requires taking a whole system view of organisations, processes and performance. Performance issues are usually caused by inappropriate management policy or the adoption of poor targets/measures (remember Deming said that 95% of quality problems are caused by management).

It is a technique that is misused by organisations that want a quick-fix to deep-rooted problems and they are likely to be disappointed at the benefits if other, more systemic, issues are not also addressed. Since a Blitz typically looks at a narrow, local area it is possible that the results may adversely affect the wider end-to-end process. As Goldratt said, "A system of local optimums is not an optimum system."

Many of these systemic issues relate to the “Command and Control nature of many organisations and can result in a whole host of problems when trying to use Blitzes to improve performance. These problems include:

- Lack of management support
- Superficial training (due to limited time), resulting in poor understanding of Lean principles
- Lack of buy-in to proposed changes from those not involved in the event
- Insufficient data to arrive at robust analysis of root causes
- Lack of implementation during the event
- Delays in implementation after the event
- Lack of sustainability after the event

The Benefits:

Where a Blitz event can be tightly defined and when there is clear scope to implement changes quickly, it can lead to significant, measurable, improvements. We have used them successfully to reduce cost/waste, reduce cycle-times and to design new customer-focussed processes. They work in the public sector, in service organisations and in manufacturing.

Just remember, running Kaizen Blitz events is not the same as implementing Lean!