

IMPROVEMENT SKILLS CONSULTING LTD.

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*“Simply, improvement...”*



# Kaizen Blitz: Doomed to fail?

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*“Culture change happens in units of one.”*

## Silver Bullets

I am more and more convinced that organisations that adopt (or are sold) Kaizen Blitzes as a way of achieving broad-scale sustainable performance improvement are inevitably going to be very disappointed. They are falling into the typical Western (UK/US and non-Japanese) trap of seeking a Silver Bullet that will be the answer to many, if not all, of their current performance problems.

Why would anyone with any common sense believe that a 1 week rapid improvement workshop is likely to make a significant difference to an organisation? Culture change happens in units of one (person by person) and a workshop involving perhaps 10-20 people is hardly likely to make that much difference, however representative of the wider organisation those people might be.

Think about it: how will 10 people from one particular process manage to convince several hundred more from other offices or areas of the business? Those others are unlikely to buy in as a result of listening to a simple presentation of a new process made by those who attended the Blitz (or worse still by the consultants who facilitated it). You might get a bit more support by engaging them in a workshop-type activity, but this can't possibly engender the same levels of understanding and commitment that the original 12 people got from their 5-day workshop.

## The origins of the Kaizen Blitz

Kaizen comes from the Japanese word meaning improvement. Blitz comes from the German word meaning lightning. So, Kaizen Blitz means lightning fast improvement. In Japan, the Kaizen Blitz is not a commonly used approach; it is far more usual for Japanese organisations to adopt systematic, enterprise-wide implementation of improvement such as the Toyota Production System (Lean).

The Kaizen Blitz originated from “autonomous study workshops” carried out to transform a specific area of a factory from batch to one-piece flow. They are most successful when adopted as part of a wider Lean implementation where there is a

clear roadmap and vision (rather than simply having one-off “rapid improvement events”).

We can see from these origins that it’s quite a leap of faith to make the assumption that running a Blitz on one process in an office in a service business can be translated into organisation-wide performance improvements.

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."

## Results of a Kaizen Blitz

Let’s consider the typical outputs and outcomes of a Kaizen Blitz. Outputs will usually include:

- A summary of the current process and problems with it (Current State Map)
- A re-designed process (Future State Map)
- Some re-designed resources to support the process (e.g. equipment, paperwork, layout)
- A “list” of ideas for improvement
- A “plan” for implementing those ideas not implemented during the Blitz
- A theoretical definition of new, improved levels of performance (e.g. cost savings, cycle-time reductions etc.)

Outcomes are likely to include:

- A high degree of enthusiasm and commitment from those who were involved in the Blitz
- A commitment(!) from “management” to support the implementation of the proposed changes over the coming weeks

Notice that “improved performance” is not an immediate outcome. All the proposed changes have to be implemented and sustained before performance will improve.

Following a Blitz, several things need to happen:

- Changes must be implemented and sustained in the “immediate” Blitz area
- Changes must be implemented and sustained in other relevant process areas that were not involved in the Blitz (e.g. other staff operating the same process in the same location and in other locations).

So, it is clear that the usual change management issues apply immediately after the Blitz. Why will other people want to change? How will they get to understand the new process and ways of working? What capabilities will they need to implement these? And, how will they actually go about it (as well as carrying on with their current day-job in the meantime).

None of these questions are easy to answer and they will be particularly challenging for any organisation without a systematic approach to organisation-wide improvement. They require Leadership, Communications, Training/Coaching/M Measurement, Performance Management. And, these have to be applied consistently, over time. In other words, there will be no “Quick Fixes” and the challenges are mostly cultural, rather than technical.

In summary, if the outputs from a Blitz (rapid improvement workshop) can’t be implemented and sustained locally, and transferred successfully to other relevant process areas, there will be no (or very limited) performance improvement.

## Can a Kaizen Blitz work?

Think back to how the Japanese typically use the approach – to transform a discrete area of a factory.

Where a Blitz event can be tightly defined and when there is clear scope to implement changes quickly by the people working in the process area, it can lead to significant, measureable 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 as much a cultural issue as it is about using a “tool”. And, it is not the same as implementing Lean!

## Our track record

Our consultants have been helping organisations in the private and public sectors to manage and improve their processes for nearly two decades. We are not wedded to a particular methodology. We help clients identify their improvement goals and then develop an approach to achieve these; invariably ensuring their people develop the skills to make further improvements themselves.

Please contact us for more information about how we can help you to manage and improve your processes.

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