

# Small steps, big changes

Most major goals are achieved faster by taking small steps instead of big ones. In Japan, this principle of continuous, incremental improvement is known as Kaizen. Read on for a brief introduction.

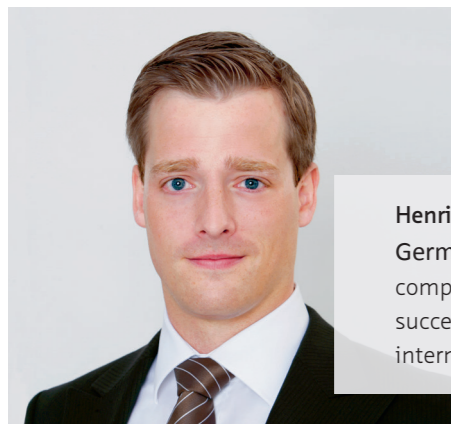
Text: Robert Wildi | Photo: Getty Images

There's an old joke that goes: How do you eat an elephant? One bite at a time. It may be a bit of a cliché these days, but the core of this statement reflects the meaning of Kaizen, a philosophy that is increasingly taking hold of global business. The magic word comprises the Japanese syllables "Kai" (to change or modify) and "Zen" (for the better). Kaizen therefore means a process of continuous improvement.

"In short, the Kaizen philosophy can be summed up as: Everyone improving, everywhere, and every day", says Henrik Trettin, project manager at Kaizen Institute Germany. Organisations in particular have come to realise that they can apply this philosophy to improve the use of staff and material resources through a series of small steps.

What's special about this method is that it gets each and every employee involved and isn't ordered from above. Initial changes achieved through Kaizen tend to be minor and barely perceptible. However, improvements gradually take effect as the process continues.

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Henrik Trettin is project manager at Kaizen Institute Germany. His job is to offer support and advice companies in a wide range of industries to ensure the successful implementation of Kaizen in national and international projects.



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## Toyota, Postmail, hospitals

Kaizen first gained international recognition in the 1960s when the Japanese car manufacturer Toyota used the philosophy, which it had developed itself, to perfect all its manufacturing processes to great acclaim from the international automotive industry. In the spirit of “adding value instead of generating waste” Kaizen has since then gradually become established in industries and organisations across the western world. Today, many Swiss companies have also adopted the Kaizen philosophy, for example:

- In 2015, the Postmail department of Schweizer Post AG won the Esprix Swiss Award for Excellence. One of the factors that impressed the panel was the Kaizen method of continuous improvement applied by the Schweizer Post to improve its processes.
- In 2004, industrial company Noventa AG in St. Gallen, specialising in the production of plastic components, restructured all its manufacturing processes based on the principles of Kaizen. In doing so, the company improved its productivity by an impressive 30%.
- Swiss hospitals have also discovered the benefits of Kaizen. A pioneer in this area is the Kantonsspital Baselland, which has significantly streamlined many of its processes, including gastronomy, nursing care and material management.

## Kaizen for individuals

However, it's not just companies, organisations and systems that can reap the benefits of Kaizen – individuals can take advantage of this philosophy as well. “And not just at work, but at home, too”, says Henrik Trettin. How does that work? It's important to first define a clear goal, such as “get more exercise”.

You can achieve this goal in accordance with the Kaizen philosophy by taking small steps. “For example,” explains Trettin, “you exit the lift a floor earlier and take the stairs the rest of the way. When you're ready, you add a second floor and so on until you're fit enough to take the stairs the whole way.”

It may sound simple, but it's still effective, maybe even because of this simplicity. The strategy of taking small, simple steps is designed to prevent you from getting frustrated and giving up. “However, to achieve sustainable results with Kaizen, you need to demonstrate perseverance”, adds Trettin. In other words, the journey is an essential part of the goal. After all, you're aiming to eat an entire elephant.

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**Additional information**  
[www.kaizen.com](http://www.kaizen.com)

## Kaizen for coach potatoes

Regular exercise helps you keep fit, slim and has proven effective against cardiovascular diseases. But what if you lack the necessary motivation? Try Kaizen! Set a clear goal from the start. For example, someone who's already in good health could aim to do the 10,000 steps a day recommended by fitness experts.

Start with a short walk every day of around 2,000 to 3,000 steps at a comfortable pace. After a time, you can increase the distance to between 4,000 and 5,000 steps and walk a little faster. Slowly but surely you'll reach your goal.