

The Five Minute Guide to the Kaizen Approach to Improving Yourself

- SPECIAL REPORT -

Kaizen is a Japanese word meaning “improvement.” While this is the literal translation however, it actually contains a lot more meaning than that when used in a number of contexts.

Kaizen as a concept was popularized by the manufacturing industry. Here, the focus was on looking at how very small changes in the assembly line could result in *massive* improvements in efficiency and output.

Imagine for example that you found a way to speed up a machine that placed screws by 2%. It might not sound like much, but when you are inserting hundreds of thousands of screws daily, it adds up to a huge difference!

This concept quickly became popular among other circles. In particular, it found popularity with the business crowd, and with self-improvement gurus.

The claim? That by changing just a few very small things in your life, you could add up to huge change. Thus were born countless articles claiming that the best way to get into shape was with “micro workouts.” By exercising just five minutes a day to form new habits.

Only this was actually missing the point somewhat.

The point of kaizen isn’t just to change little things and see the cumulative effect. It’s about looking at processes and flows, and finding ways to remove waste and improve efficiency.

While there is some truth in the notion that starting a big exercise program is a mistake and that doing something smaller can often lead to better results, that’s only part of the story. Understanding what kaizen *truly* means allows you to take even more benefit from it and to enact transformative change in your life.

An Example: Fitness

If you want to apply the theory of Kaizen to your workouts then, what might that look like?

The mistake a lot of people make is to try and add a huge training program on top of their already-packed schedules. This is where they go wrong.

Working out four times a week might not seem like much, but if you think that's 4 hours of training, and probably 6 hours out of your routine when you consider travel to and from the gym/getting showered etc. Then there's washing your gym kit and getting it ready the next day.

This is a *conservative* estimate.

That's nearly a whole working day of exercise you want to start doing! And currently you do *nothing*!

Thinking Small

This is one of the very big things that stops us from getting into shape – the simple fact that we come home from work and we are completely *drained* in terms of energy, and all we want to do is spend some time with our old friend “lots and lots of cake and alcohol.”

The problem is that your routine is already packed and that you don't really have time or energy left to do anything else. So what do you do?

One trick is to snap out of this and overcome that energy drain, so how do you do that? One method is to challenge yourself to do just “something” that day even if it's a very small bit of exercise.

For instance, you might just try and do a quick set of fifty press ups. This is a good idea because it will be good for you to do *something* – always do something instead of nothing as it will have a big impact on your body and help get your blood pumping. But more to the point after you've done fifty press ups you'll quickly realise that you feel more awake and energetic and that you want to capitalize on those initial fifty. As a result, you'll probably end up doing an entire workout.

Here's the rule then: make sure that every day you do at least three sets of any exercise. So, your aim is still to do more, and to do your training program, but if you find yourself in the above situation and feeling too tired and short on time to start, you should make this effort to do just say 3 sets of 20 press ups, or 20 sit ups.

This is the kaizen approach as it is most often packaged: doing something small in order to get big results.

Reason a) that this works, is that something is always better than nothing and if you do just this small amount you will find yourself improving at least slightly, or at least more than you would. More importantly though, as soon as you've done those 20 press ups (which seem like no challenge at all and seem do-able) you'll find yourself throwing yourself into the rest of the training – because you'll have found it's not really that bad, and you'll have gotten your blood pumping thus giving yourself more energy and more power to train.

No matter how tired you are or how busy you are, there's no excuse not to accomplish five minutes of training. So you can do this challenge. It's up to you if you make this a rule in your life or not, but if you don't you have only yourself to blame for not making progress.

Time and Effort

One of the things that stops a lot of people from going to the gym as well is simply the time and effort it takes for them to start. The problem here is that they have to no doubt walk or drive to the gym – already taking up a significant amount of time, they have to face the cold outdoors, they have to wash afterward, they have to do more washing... it all takes a lot more time and energy than just the hour it takes to work out.

Mistake number one: it doesn't take an hour to work out! If you're training for an hour then you're probably wasting a *whole* lot of time in the gym and it's time to stop. Using the best methods to ensure that your workouts are fast and intense is the best way to improve the quality of your workout, *and* to make it much less of a time investment. You should be in and out in less than forty minutes in most cases and your heart rate should never really drop.

Process Fixes for Exercise

That is where a lot of books and articles on kaizen for exercise would stop. But again, that's missing the most important aspects of the concept.

Kaizen in manufacturing is about looking at the manufacturing process and finding sticking points – finding waste – where things can be improved. And this is what you need to do with your training.

In the past, you've struggled to stick to a training program. That should tell you that your current approach to training is somehow inefficient.

So, you need to fix it.

The next plan then, is to make sure that you make working out as easy to do as possible as quickly as possible. This means that if you can make a home gym then that's fantastic – you should have a home gym for those times when making it out to the actual gym is just a little *too much*, and all your home gym needs is a bit of floor space and maybe a pull up bar (don't underestimate the power of bodyweight training).

For going to the gym it's important to create a system. Make going to the gym as *easy* as you can so that you've chosen one near to you or near to your work, and one that has a shower etc. so you can get ready while you're there. Then create a "system" or a routine that will make this all as easy as possible – I used to go to the gym straight after work on a Friday, and I'd shower there straight after to save time at home. Every day when I got back I'd swap the towel in my gym bag and throw in a new pair of boxers and change of clothes so that I didn't have to do that the next day, and I'd have a separate shampoo etc. in the bag so that I never had to remember to pack it.

So, after work I'd hit the gym for forty minutes and shower meaning I got home only an hour later but had saved time from my evening routine and was able to fully relax. Because it was habit, it never got in the way of anything else.

The Rest of the Lifestyle

I've similarly created a system for the washing up and made the environment as conducive as possible – by getting enough draining boards that the entire lot of washing up can be done in one go without drying, by drastically limiting the amount of crockery I use, and by ensuring to do it straight away after eating (and once again – excuses just don't cut it).

You might be thinking I've gone mad at this point. How can fixing your washing up routine *possibly* help you to work out? But here's the thing: if you spend less time washing up, you have *more* time and energy to do the things you want. Which in this case means exercising?

To look at this in kaizen terms, we are dealing with waste, and making our lifestyles more efficient. And by doing this, we're able to fit in more training.

Likewise, you might look at what time you're waking up. You could get more time in your day if you didn't keep hitting snooze. And maybe if you negotiate working from home once a week? What if you were to get some kind of chore done on the train on your commute back.

Small changes like this can give you not only more time, but more energy. You've made your lifestyle more efficient in order to *gain* the 6 hours of exercise that you want to commit to. This approach turns the usual methods of starting exercise completely on their head – and to impressive effect.

Fixing Energy

Failing this another thing you can do is simply to try taking a big breath in, standing up, and jumping up and down a bit. This will once again get the blood flowing and you'll feel instantly more relaxed. You should *smile* at this point too (as Charlie Chaplin would say) because "facial feedback" will ensure that this improves your mood. And often you'll find that it's partly your mood that's holding you back.

This works because you're addressing your lack of energy and re-fuelling. It's a small thing, that can have big consequences. Another psychological technique you can use here is called 'priming' which means creating the right mood for whatever it is you want to be doing. Try watching an action film with Arnie (I recommend *Commando*) and you'll suddenly feel raring to go and to hit the gym *hard in the face*.

Of course, there are also physical things that affect your energy too, so make sure you remember that you are managing your energy levels and trying to save some for when you do your workout. Make sure you start your day with a hearty meal of complex carbs which will gradually release energy throughout the day, make sure you get *lots* of sleep (at least 8 hours) which is also high quality, and make sure that you don't exhaust yourself with stress.

Again, this is kaizen done properly: you are looking at every aspect of your routine and your lifestyle, in order to see areas that can be improved to get the results you want to see.

Applying This to Other Areas

Now you understand what kaizen is *really* all about, you can begin thinking of ways to apply it in other areas of your life.

For example, how might you improve your productivity? By looking at every step of your work flow and seeing where *any* time or energy is being wasted. Speed up your computer boot time by five minutes and you just gained 25 minutes (at least) of extra time a week. That's a significant amount of time to be doing things!

You can apply this to relationships, to your health, to your finances, and *much* more. It's time to stop making bold, unrealistic assertions – and to start taking a more kaizen approach!