

Sarah Harvey

**Kaizen: The Japanese
Method for Transforming
Habits, One Small Step at
a Time**

Made by Blinkist



These key insights in blinks were written by a team of experts at Blinkist. We screen the world of nonfiction to choose the very best books. Then, we read them deeply and transform them into this concise format that brings you the most inspiring ideas from the text.

Maybe these blinks will inspire you to dig deeper, or maybe they're enough to start you thinking and then on to something new. However you read blinks, we hope they help you become an even brighter you.

What's in it for me? Transform your habits in small steps.

Have you ever made a New Year's resolution, only to find yourself throwing in the towel by the second week of January? If you struggle to make changes to your routine, you're not alone.

Making a leap into the dark can be scary when it comes to changing habits. To conquer this natural fear, the kaizen approach focuses on taking slow and steady steps forward. Originally a Japanese management theory, it's now a widely-applied

philosophy that values continuous improvement toward lasting change.

In these blinks, you'll find out how you can adopt kaizen techniques to take small steps to transform daily habits across your personal life, and accomplish ambitious goals.

You'll also learn

- how kaizen became credited for the success of the Toyota car brand;
- about *yokoten*, the Japanese concept of copying positive changes; and

- how improving by 1-percent margins led the British cycling team to repeated victory.

Kaizen values incremental growth.

Let's say you want to beat your sugar addiction. So you sign up with a hypnotherapist who promises to make your sweet cravings vanish in five sessions. It may be an expensive solution, but you feel like you've tried everything else.

After the last hypnotherapy session, you walk out feeling empowered. In fact, you manage to go the entire following week without any sugar cravings. But fast-forward to a bad morning the week after that and you find

yourself at a vending machine, begrudgingly pressing for a candy bar. As you toss the cold coins in the slot, you regret the money spent on the hypnotist.

The key message here is: Kaizen values incremental growth.

We live in a culture that expects instant results, so it's no surprise that many health and self-help trends promise overnight success. But a much more effective way to transform habits is to take one small action at a time, repeating it until you get results. This underpins the Japanese philosophy of kaizen.

While *kaizen* is a Japanese word for *change*, the kaizen method originated as a business theory, created by the US government to help Japan reboot its economy after World War II. Kaizen is credited as influencing the ensuing success of many Japanese companies, most notably Toyota. Labeled “the Toyota Way” by the company, kaizen has been used as a strategy to enhance product lines, by incrementally reducing production waste while improving quality.

Ironically, by the 1980s, Japanese companies were doing so well that it gave American

businesses reason to fret. So kaizen returned to the US, as an organizational theory, in a book titled *Kaizen: The Key to Japan's Competitive Success* by Masaaki Imai.

In his book, Imai encourages managers to set short-, medium-, and long-term goals around four criteria: business growth, product quality, customer service, and staff motivation. Additionally, every employee – from the receptionist to the CEO – is invited to contribute suggestions for ways to improve. The emphasis is always on long-term goals and

continuous improvement
through small changes.

As Imai acknowledges, kaizen has wider applications far beyond the business world. Whether you want to adopt a healthier lifestyle, get better at saving money, or rethink your career, kaizen can set you on the path to success. But first, you have to know where you stand.

“The Kaizen philosophy assumes that our way of life – be it our working life, our social life, or our home life – deserves to be constantly improved.”

– Masaaki Imai

The first stage of kaizen is to step back and analyze your habits.

Think of the most basic activities you undertake each day, like drinking water or checking your phone. Now, imagine if you had to focus all your mental energy on each of those tasks, every single time you did them. Chances are, you'd quickly become mentally exhausted.

This reveals why we form habits in the first place. According to Ben Gardner, senior lecturer in psychology at King's College

London, our brains “lock in” repeated behaviors to preserve mental resources necessary for bigger, more important tasks.

Here’s the key message: The first stage of kaizen is to step back and analyze your habits.

The downside of locking in behaviors becomes obvious when we want to change them. Gardner elaborates that we learn habits through rewarding cues that are repeated over time. If you consume sugary treats in stressful situations, for example, and it helps you deal with stress, then your brain develops an association

between stress cues and sugar consumption. The association strengthens with repetition until you're reaching for a chocolate bar whenever a stressful situation crops up.

Analyzing your existing behavior can help you identify the habits you want to make or break. So the first step of kaizen is to interrogate your habits, by making an inventory of your life.

Grab a piece of paper and divide it into sections. Everyone will have different life priorities, but categories can include things like home, health, career, and relationships. For each area,

question whether you're doing the most you can to achieve happiness. If the category is your career, and you only have a vague sense that you're unhappy in your job, break it down into parts – for example, researching, administration, networking – and write down what you love or hate about each part. Take your time with your answers and be honest with yourself. Maybe you'll find the real problem is a lack of work-life balance.

Rather than just listing what you're unhappy with, you'll be more motivated if your inventory also includes new

challenges you want to try. Are there any activities you wish you'd never abandoned? Or maybe a physical challenge you've always aspired to? Do a brainstorm of activities you feel drawn to.

When you feel good about your inventory, you should have a goal – or several – to choose from. Next, it's time to plan your actions.

Your first commitment should be so small you barely notice any difference.

When Sir David Brailsford became head of the British cycling team in 2002, the team was doing poorly. To improve performance, Brailsford got the team to break down every aspect of cycling into small parts – from the cyclists’ nutrition to bike maintenance – and gave them the target of improving each part by just 1 percent.

Instead of aiming for perfection from the start, Brailsford took

on the kaizen approach, aiming for small gains that would add up. Over time, this accumulation began to generate a “contagious enthusiasm” among the once-struggling team, who went on to win the majority of gold medals in both the 2008 and 2012 Olympic Games.

**The key message in this blink is:
Your first commitment should be so small you barely notice any difference.**

As King’s College Senior Lecturer Benjamin Gardner explains, the human motivational system is chaotic, since people don’t experience

immediate rewards from good behavior. This makes it harder to change those habits that deliver immediate rewards, like forgoing a steak or a cigarette. Kaizen techniques are an effective way of transforming those habits precisely because they involve minimal disruption while promoting progress.

Echoing Brailsford's concept of "contagious enthusiasm," the first small step to achieving your goal serves to encourage you to take the next step and the one after that.

Ask yourself: What is the smallest, most easily achievable

step you can make toward your goal? For example, if you want to eliminate meat from your diet, could you start being vegetarian for two nights per week rather than one? Or could you add one more vegetarian recipe to your regular meal routine? The change should be so small that you barely feel its impact.

If you want to pick up a physical habit like running, first, simply plan your route. Then, walk it a few times before gradually introducing short runs. This step-by-step technique is recommended by experts and makes it a lot easier to sustain

change in the early stage. It also makes lasting change more likely.

Once you've established your goals and first steps, write them down. Next, let's set a time frame for completing them.

Set a time frame for your short-, medium-, and long-term goals.

We've talked about forming goals for transforming your habits. But after you've established your goal and "first kaizen step," where do you go from there?

Well, once you have a long-term goal, the next kaizen step is to break it down into smaller shorter- and medium-term goals. Not only will breaking your goal down into chunks make it seem more manageable, it'll also help you plan your

actions around a clear time frame.

Here's the key message: Set a time frame for your short-, medium-, and long-term goals.

Let's say your long-term goal is to learn a new piece on the guitar. The very smallest thing you could do to get started would be just to listen to the piece. Then, you can allocate five minutes each day to practicing a part of it – this would be your medium-term goal. You could practice the same part until you've got it down, before moving on to the next. Following the contagious-

enthusiasm approach of Brailsford's cycling team, you'll likely want to increase the duration of how long you practice each day until you're able to play the piece well.

But what about goals that don't have an endpoint? If you want to incorporate continuous habits into your life, such as eating more healthily or picking up a hobby, it's especially important to have a way of measuring progress. So if your goal is to take up yoga, then you can make it measurable by writing down, "I want to participate in one yoga class every week."

The kaizen philosophy advocates adjusting your time frame as you go, according to your natural pace. So if you find you're feeling overspent along the way, then instead of increasing the duration of your practice, make it even smaller. For example, if you're struggling to write 200 words of a novel each day, then reduce it to just 100. It might seem like very little, but having 700 words at the end of each week is better than having none. And the more words you accumulate, the more likely you are to stay the course.

Keep in mind, in kaizen the focus is not to cross off activities from a to-do list. Rather, it's to aim for ongoing improvement through baby steps. The important thing is to keep a close eye on where you're stepping as you go.

Monitor your habits closely and review your progress regularly.

Hani Motoko, the woman known as Japan's first female journalist, believed that keeping on top of one's finances was essential to happiness. So in 1904, she invented a journaling method known as *kakeibo*, intended to help women at the time keep track of spending.

A practice still popular in Japan today, the purpose is to keep a register of all incoming and outgoing expenses. Motoko stressed the need to physically put pen to paper as a mindful

way to process what you spend. She encouraged checking in with the ledger monthly to analyze how your spending is progressing, and to inform which goals to concentrate on the following month.

**The key message here is:
Monitor your habits closely and
review your progress regularly.**

Likewise, one of the most important parts of the kaizen process is tracking progress. Not only is it motivating to look back over previous weeks and months to see how your behaviors have changed, it also

brings into focus things where you need to improve.

The author recommends starting a bullet journal, which is a technique for designing your own type of journal similar to the kakeibo. The layout will depend on what habits you're tracking. One way to do it is to turn the page of your notebook horizontally and write the days of the month along the top, leaving a blank column at the side. In that column, list whatever goals you have in bullet points. If you achieve the habit on a given day, mark it by coloring in the corresponding horizontal space. This way, you'll

have a clear visual depiction of your progress.

If you aren't a journaling type, you can simply keep bullet points in a note-taking app on your phone. In fact, your smartphone can be a great resource for tracking progress thanks to the countless apps available for measuring habits, including how many steps you walk in a day, or the quality of your sleep. Use whatever works best for you, as long as you're using a method to track the habits you're committing to changing.

When you reach the end of the month, remember to look back on what you've achieved. This will help you pinpoint what you'd like to change during the next month. Then, set up new monthly goals and adjust your habit trackers appropriately.

Kaizen is a personalized approach to lifelong change. Go at your own pace.

Let's say you want to take up drawing. So you allocate an hour per week to your new activity. It goes well for a few weeks until, one day, you get some bad news: your apartment contract isn't going to be renewed as planned. You have to move out next month. Faced with this distressing new reality, it's likely that you're going to have to put your sketchbook down for a while.

This is the key message: Kaizen is a personalized approach to lifelong change. Go at your own pace.

It's always exciting to start new habits or get rid of unhealthy ones. But distressing situations like a sudden house move or job loss can make it easy to stray from the path of change. The key is to be patient with yourself. No matter the situation, beating yourself up for not reaching your goals is completely unproductive.

Remember that everyone moves at a different pace. According to various studies, it can take

anywhere between 18 to 254 days for a behavior to become automatic. Evidently, if any conclusion can be drawn from a range so wide, it's that the time it takes to form habits varies dramatically from person to person, and habit to habit.

The beauty of kaizen is that it's a flexible and personalized approach to lifelong change – so be mindful of what works for you. Staying aware of your feelings and behaviors will help you identify when it's time to step back. Just because everybody else is raving about that extreme exercise routine

doesn't mean that it works for you.

If you find yourself not meeting short-term goals, simply return to the very smallest possible action you can take instead. If you're feeling too down to go for a 5-kilometer run, for instance, go for a short walk instead. Taking a small action is better than taking none, and it enables you to gradually work your way up to your goal. If you stumble along the way, just wait until you're ready and take the smallest action to build back up again.

Most importantly, remember not to get caught up in end goals. The kaizen approach is to focus your attention toward continuous improvement.

Bringing it back to Toyota's car production line where it all began, it's about refining your methods as you slowly move ahead.

Final summary

The key message in these blinks:

Kaizen is a Japanese management theory that encourages taking incremental steps to transform habits. But before deciding what to change, you need to step back and interrogate your habits. Define your long-term goals and make a plan to start working toward them gradually. As you go, track your progress to make sure that you approach change in a way that works for you. By edging toward your goals at a steady pace, with minimum disruption

to your routine, you keep the stakes low. But don't worry if you do hit a stumbling block on the way – you can always adjust your pace and build back up.

Actionable advice:

Declutter your personal space.

It may seem daunting to sort out a cluttered drawer of files or a messy desktop. So break it down. Once a week, allocate five minutes to a single drawer – or even just a single file – that you wish to tidy up. Concentrate on the smallest task each time and slowly watch the clutter disappear.

Got feedback?

We'd love to hear what you think about our content! Just drop an email to remember@blinkist.com with *Kaizen* as the subject line and share your thoughts!

Nice work! You're all done with this one.

We publish new books every week at blinkist.com.

Come and see – there's so much more to learn.

Inspired to read the full book?

[Get it here.](#)

Copyright © 2014 by Blinks Labs GmbH. All rights reserved.