

# one small step: the Art of Kaizen

BY JOHN KAIN

**K**aizen is a method and philosophy that is rooted in the foundation of incremental continuous improvement. It was originally implemented in post war Japan businesses to help improve productivity and worker morale and has since expanded into the realm of personal growth. Like Morita Therapy, Kaizen does not directly strive to reduce symptoms but looks first to create purposeful action through small steps. Instead of beginning a diet to lose 50 pounds and creating a disciplined routine to accomplish that goal, Kaizen would simply begin an action-oriented process of incremental change – walk in place for 45 seconds a day. The key is the repetition of an action -- not the big brass ring of losing 50 lbs. By keeping it small, the system – be it the workers in a manufacturing plant or an individual – naturally exhibits less resistance (fear of change) and is thus more open to improvement.

One of the leaders in bringing Kaizen into the personal growth movement is Dr. Robert Maurer. His book *One Small Step Can Change Your Life: The Kaizen Way* has laid the foundation for personal Kaizen techniques. The technique hangs its hat on four simple principles: Ask small questions; Think small thoughts; Take small actions; and Solve small problems. The following *Thirty Thousand Days* interview with Dr. Maurer delves a little deeper into the Kaizen process.



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**30k Days: You claim that Americans believe the myth of the big change. Why do you think this is a myth and why is it wiser for us to shift our expectations toward the small change ?**

**Dr. Maurer:** Big changes simply don't always work. It is hard for us, as a country, to make small steps and people are ridiculed when they do. During the campaign John McCain was criticized for focusing on earmarks, a fifteen billion dollar expense when our debt is in the many trillions. When then Senator Obama suggested we keep our tire pressure up, he too was ridiculed for his small suggestion. The research in change reveals small steps have an equal or greater chance of success as the big steps. We are not trying to make innovation or big steps wrong, it's just not the one and only strategy for us to choose from.

**30k Days: can you explain, in simple terms, some of the brain research that supports the idea of small steps.**

**Dr. Maurer:** The brain responds to big challenges by triggering the amygdala, the fear center in the brain. If the challenge is perceived as too great, if the person stumbles, the fear becomes crippling and the person gives up, often

with despair or self criticism. If the steps are small, the fear mechanism is quiet and the brain develops new habits from the repetition of small steps.

**30k Days: in Morita therapy finding one's purpose for action is an integral step to taking effective action. What is your view of the role of purpose, or mission, in overcoming obstacles and accomplishing something meaningful with our lives? how does Kaizen help someone discover their purpose?**

**Dr. Maurer:** Purpose is the North Star that guides our journey -- that propels change. If one has difficulty finding one's purpose, the best Kaizen technique is asking a question each day, opening up the heart to hear the answer. The possible questions include:

*What is the emotion I want to experience as I go through my day?*

*What matters most to me in life?*

*What am I here to be and to do?*

By asking the question each day, with calm curiosity, then answers will begin to appear. The repetition of the question is the key.

**30k Days:** Many people who are trying to move forward in life encounter fear sooner or later. And we naturally tend to turn away from anything that stimulates fear. can you say something about the idea that fear is good.

**Dr. Maurer:** Fear is the basic emotion of the brain. In the presence of fear we feel nothing else, in the absence of fear, everything else. It is a natural response when faced with challenges. If we can build new habits without triggering fear, all the better!

**30k Days:** People often struggle in the area of diet and exercise. can you give us an example of how someone might use the Kaizen idea to keep from putting on weight and keeping healthy.

**Dr. Maurer:** Exercising one minute a day every day builds a habit. Increasing one minute a week and soon you have a habit. The Mayo Clinic found that thin people simply move more during the day. They walk up escalators, pace while on the phone, walk in parking lots. This resulted in a 350 calorie a day difference, which added up to a 30 to 40 lb weight loss in a year!

**30k Days:** can you give us a personal example where you used the Kaizen approach to either change a habit or accomplish some important goal?

**Dr. Maurer:** When I received the contract to write this book, I was overwhelmed. I recalled many interviews I had seen with world famous and Nobel-prize winning authors who had a goal of one page a day... I used kaizen and decided to write one minute a day! That goal eliminated all my fear and excuses and I sat down to write... many days I forgot to stop! I increased my goal by a minute a

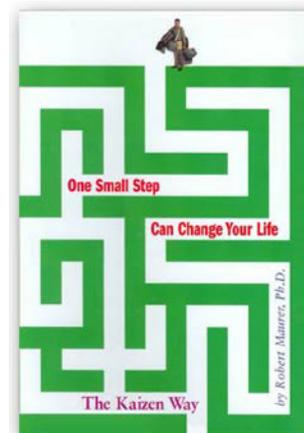
week, but many days the flow of the writing carried me forward. I once counseled a medical student who was at a point where he had to commit to a specialty. He couldn't make up his mind. He was interested in so many of the options. He waited and waited until the deadline, which actually reduced his chances of getting one of the better residencies.

**30k Days:** Kaizen seems to promote success in many areas of human endeavor, from business to personal relationships. Are there any circumstances in which Kaizen might not be the most effective tool?

**Dr. Maurer:** Kaizen (small steps) and Innovation (large steps) are both worthwhile strategies. The question is, are you free to choose whichever is more useful at the moment. Using big steps is fine and if the fear is too great, or the motivation too little, fall back on Kaizen. It is the freedom to choose that is the goal. For many people, big steps are the one and only strategy.

*Dr. Robert Maurer is an Associate Clinical Professor at the UCLA School of Medicine, a behavioral health instructor at the Canyon Ranch Health Spa in Tuscon, Arizona and runs The Science of Excellence, a consulting firm. His book One Small Step Can Change Your Life: The Kaizen Way is available through the ToDo Institute bookstore.*

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