

16. Think Kaizen, Think Positive

The Japanese word [Kaizen](#) can be best translated to English with a full sentence: *It's good, but it could be better.* The term originates from TQM (Total Quality Management) literature and describes a technique of continuous improvement. For me, it is the key concept of successful change management and the foundation of innovation.

Kaizen is based on positive thinking; it aims at the deliberate elimination of criticism. In essence, it combines two good ideas into one. First, it reflects the belief that nothing is so great that it doesn't require a change. Kaizen person is open for improvement and innovation. Secondly, it helps prevent unnecessary conflicts which are so common in most change management projects and situations.

Our culture is dominated by the view: *It has to be changed because it's bad.* Such a view is responsible for a vicious circle of blame and antagonism towards the predecessors. We explain the need for change by attacking the forefathers and blaming them for the mistakes from the past. It always ends up in fruitless battles, negative energy and perception of change and innovation as a problem, rather than as a solution.

By saying "it's good," a change agent has indirectly praised all who are responsible for it. Therefore, he is not burdened with the past, nor does he let it hold him a hostage. By adding "everything can be better," he has cleared a path for action, calling for an initiative to change the existing system in a natural, hopefully, conflict-free way.

The mindset of most innovators reads like this: *Some idiots have ruined the system (company, country, project, organization), and now, it's my duty to change and innovate.* This is a bad start. It causes unnecessary conflicts with predecessors who feel attacked and insulted. Their most natural reaction is resentment for the innovation, its supporters, and the ideas and actions associated with it.

Take a look at the following story. *A father and his son climbed the mountain. Suddenly, the son stumbled and fell. Angry and humiliated, he screamed Ouch! To his surprise, the mountain replied with Ouch! Who are you, the kid asked curiously. Who are you, answered the mountain. You are creepy, cried the kid again. You are creepy, responded the mountain. A coward, cried the little one. A coward, the mountain was sure to reply. What is it, Dad, the kid asked his father. Watch this, son, said his father and shouted: You're the best! You're the best, replied the mountain, and then the father explained: People call it echo, but it's actually life itself. It returns everything you say or do. Life is simply a reflection of your actions. If you want more love in the world, create more love in your heart and your voice. If you want more success in your team, improve their knowledge and skills. This is true for all you do; life will return everything you've invested in it. Whatever happens to you is not a coincidence, but rather a reflection of your actions.*

Of course the moral of the story is simple; if you give Kaizen, you will get Kaizen. According to [Sun Tzu](#), the supreme art of war is to subdue the enemy without fighting.

There was an important role called Evet-effendi at the Turkish court. His task was to suck up in order to inoculate his Sultan against the effects of flattery; in fact, to make him sick of it, as sycophants muddy a leader's thinking. People who constantly praise the leader and think (or act as though) he is always right are, in fact, no help at all.

After two years of seemingly excellent cooperation, [Lee Iacocca](#) shocked his management team with a decision to fire his vice-president. Dumbfounded and surprised, all of them commented: The two of you have never had a single disagreement. The vice-president always stood behind all your ideas and actions. He was completely dedicated and fully committed to whatever you did. Why have you fired a man with whom you got along so well? Iacocca responded: My point exactly! Why should I pay a huge salary to a man who always has my opinion? The founder and the legend of Xerox, Barry Rand, used to warn his managers: If you have a yes-man working for you, one of you is redundant!

A true change master must rise above the need to be admired, flattered and fully supported. True fellowship means that there are two independent individuals. Everything else is "fellowship." Quite true, being surrounded by the think-alikes suits your ego and creates a climate of eternal partnership. However, such fellowship is fragile and unstable. Followers may be loyal to any leader and they might leave you as soon as you are no longer the boss. Also, fellowship is a sure sign of lack of creativity and initiative.

That's why creative environments must discourage a lack of criticism, sucking up and other bureaucratic inventions where position means everything and human integrity counts for nothing. Instead, innovation depends on honest debate, exchange of views and open criticism. Creative organizations need a climate in which all ideas are analyzed by good judgment and common sense, regardless of who presented them.

It is important to make sure that all the talent within every organization is used to its full potential. Doing what they do best all the time makes people happy and efficient. But only if the boss keeps noticing, praising and rewarding their efforts and their results. The boss should be able to catch people in what they do best. The trouble is that very few organizational systems are designed to implement such an approach. Instead of the positive, they focus on the negative!

Suppose you are [Jerry Seinfeld](#) and you tell a joke to a group of people in a club. In response, they may either laugh or ignore you. If they burst out laughing, such feedback will inspire you to tell another joke and make it even better. If they ignore you, you could be the best standup comedian in the world, but you are in big trouble. Running low on self-confidence, and high on fear to be rejected, you will hardly be able to tell another joke.

No office, laboratory or factory floor is much different from that club stage. Whatever you do at work, the feedback from your teammates, and especially from your boss, can turn it into a wonderful experience or into a real nightmare. A positive reaction is a prerequisite of better performance, high creativity and growing enthusiasm! A negative response will cut your wings in half!

There are different ways to provide feedback in different organizational cultures. The boss and his team may be accustomed (or trained) to recognize and reward whatever someone does well so that he can develop and improve. Or they may have a habit of bringing everybody down and systematically ignoring all the efforts and positive results. One of the key features of creative organizational culture is the leader's ability to encourage teammates to "laugh at good jokes" in order to make them better next time. Such an attitude is powerful and motivating enough to turn us all into world class standup comedians or great innovators.

The catch-them-in-what-they-do-best approach has other important advantages. For example, a typical boss spends a lot of time with the poor-performing employees, supervising them carefully, criticizing them and correcting their mistakes. As a result, he has no time for best and most creative employees. So, he misses the opportunity to learn from them, teach them, and listen to their ideas. As a rule, those who are the best get buried by work the boss provides for them while those who are the worst bury the boss with the work they impose on him. Is it logical?

My university regulations force me to spend a lot of time with the worst students. When they repeatedly fail, they are entitled to additional exams, extended deadlines, and supplementary consultations. There is a common and sad feeling that the system is designed for the bad students. They are always outspoken in "fighting for their rights." Not unlike the problematic employees who use all the legal options and "democratic means" to protect their rights and position.

Innovative environments should always try to create rules to promote, protect, affirm and support all positive people and processes within the organization. Likewise, a creative boss should try to spend as much time as possible with the best employees. They are the ones he can learn most from, create the best results with, and lean on in challenging situations.

Spending time with the best makes you better and more creative. If I want to improve my tennis skills, I should choose a partner who is superior. Competing with him, and watching him, I can make my skills grow and improve. If I choose an inferior opponent, whom I can beat without difficulty, I may feel good, but my skills remain

unchanged. A first class leader looks for people who are smarter than he is, and a second class leader surrounds him with third-class people. This is because the former wishes to advance and do a great job while the latter just wants to outsmart his team.

Post-it® notes are those great little self-stick notepapers. Most people have them, use them and love them. Like many other inventions, they were not a planned product, but it happened due to a friendship of two creative individuals. The first named Spencer Silver was working in the 3M research laboratories in 1970 trying to find a strong adhesive. Silver developed a new one, but it was even weaker than what 3M already manufactured. It stuck to objects, but could easily be lifted off. It was super weak instead of super strong and no one knew what to do with the stuff, until one Sunday four years later. On that day, Silver's friend, also a 3M employee named Arthur Fry was singing in the church's choir. He used markers to keep his place in the hymnal, but they kept falling out of the book. Remembering Silver's adhesive, Fry took some to coat his markers. With the weak adhesive, the markers stayed in place, yet lifted off without damaging the pages. 3M began distributing Post-it® Notes nationwide in 1980, ten years after Silver developed the super weak adhesive, and it turned into a great global success.

Spending time with the best brings us to another important idea, networking. If you want to be innovative, you should be networked, move in the right circles, socialize with creative people, and have connections in the right places. It is always good to be well-informed and to communicate with the most successful among your colleagues. It is of great importance to regularly meet authorities in the field like consultants or professors who are in touch with theory and research. It is vital to systematically contact people in government positions close to your line of work, as well as your suppliers and customers in order to learn what problems they are faced with.

Spending time with the best puts us on the edge. It enables us to deal with tough challenges; it sets our goals high, creates opportunities for innovation, and provides us with valuable information and encouraging experiences. Also, it sharpens our instincts. We always gain by networking with the best! Networking is one of the keys to success. It is also a good way of bringing people together and allowing them to succeed more easily. It is a continuous challenge for every boss to assemble, recognize, reward and keep together the outstanding workers, catching them in what they do best helping them to be more creative and enabling them to tell, each day a new joke better than the day before.