

***“Kaizen is an effective, enjoyable way to achieve a specific goal, but it also extends a more profound challenge: to meet life’s constant demands for change by seeking out continual—but always small—improvement.”***

***– Robert Maurer Ph.D.***

What is kaizen?

A Japanese practice of taking small steps to continuously improve a process or product.

Why is kaizen an effective personal development strategy?

***"Attempts to reach goals through radical or revolutionary means often fail because they heighten fear. But the small steps of kaizen disarm the brain's fear response, stimulating rational thought and creative play."*** – Robert Maurer Ph.D.

Setting a big goal is exciting. But it's also scary. The larger the change we want to make, the more fear we experience (fear of the unknown and fear of failure). When a region of the brain called the amygdala detects fear, it triggers our fight-or-flight response in the body. When our fight-or-flight response is active, we instinctively seek out comfort and find it hard to concentrate on our long-term goals.

However, when we use kaizen and take embarrassingly small steps towards a goal, we tiptoe past the amygdala's fear detection system and avoid activating the flight-or-fight response. These small steps eliminate a fear of failure and remove the urge to distract ourselves. The smaller the steps we take, the quicker we lay new neural networks in the brain and develop positive habits.

Dr. Maurer says with kaizen "your resistance to change begins to weaken. Where once you might have been daunted by change, your new mental software will have you moving toward your ultimate goal at a pace that may well exceed your expectations."

**Take large steps towards change --> Feel fear --> Activate fight-or-flight response --> Seek short-term relief/comfort --> Failure**

**Take very small steps --> Bypass fear --> Reduce the urge for immediate comfort --> Take action and build constructive habits --> Success**

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Two counterintuitive ways to use Kaizen to achieve large goals



Ask small questions

***“Your brain loves questions and won’t reject them . . . unless the question is so big it triggers fear. Questions such as ‘How am I going to get thin (or rich, or married) by the end of the year?’ or ‘What new product will bring in a million more dollars for the company?’ are awfully big and frightening.”*** – Robert Maurer Ph.D.

If you’ve ever tackled a big creative project, like writing a speech, you’ve experienced the destructive power of a BIG question. By asking: "How can I write a speech that leaves my audience spellbound?" you start feeling the pressure to perform. You fidget, you check Facebook, you grab another cup of coffee...every time you attempt to start writing you draw a blank.

Now imagine you asked yourself: "What's one idea I could share?" or "What's one story I could share?" or "What's one thing I want my audience to do differently as a result of this speech?" After asking yourself these questions over and over again you'd come up with ideas. Soon the words would start pouring out! Without the fear of a big question your brain is eager to come up with creative ways to make progress.

***"If you are trying to reach a specific goal, ask yourself every day: What is one small step I could take toward reaching my goal? Consider writing your question on a Post-it note and then sticking it onto your nightstand (or dashboard, or coffeepot)."*** – Robert Maurer Ph.D.



Focus on small intermediate rewards

When Karan Pryor, author of 'Don't shoot the dog,' was attending graduate school, she found it hard to get to class after a long day of work. Going to class required a one hour commute, three hour lecture and another long hour back home in the cold. Thinking of going to school everyday to get her Ph.D. filled her with anxiety.

***"Instead (of focusing on the entire trip), Pryor broke her journey down into a series of distinct segments—walking to the subway station, changing trains, taking the stairs to her classroom. Each time she completed a segment, she allowed herself a square of chocolate. In this way she was training herself to associate each segment of the journey with pleasure. 'In a few weeks,' she says, 'I was able to get all the way to class without either the chocolate or the internal struggle.'"*** – Robert Maurer Ph.D.

***"Small rewards are the perfect encouragement. Not only are they inexpensive and convenient, but they also stimulate the internal motivation required for lasting change."*** – Robert Maurer Ph.D.

To achieve an audacious goal simply focus on the smallest step you can take to make progress. While the steps you take may be small, the change you'll experience won't be.

***“Improve by 1% a day, and in 70 days you’re twice as good.”*** – Alan Weiss, Ph.D.