



Overseas trainees learning about the thorough inspection system at a Japanese manufacturer.

Nippon Mind Supports Workplaces in the World

The concept of “Kaizen” contributed to the post-World War II economic growth of Japan. Today, the term is widely acknowledged all over the world. This Japanese wisdom is now spreading more and more in the developing countries.



VARIOUS IDEAS ENCHANTING THE TRAINEES

“At the end of the process, we examine the parts thoroughly with our human eyes to check whether or not they have any flaws.”

In a box, small components of several centimeters thick are neatly and tightly packed. The employees meticulously examine each of them using a microscope. This is taking place at a factory of Surteckariya Co. Ltd., a manufacturer based in Aichi Prefecture, specializing in surface finishing of car components and the like. Their strongest point is the thorough quality control. To learn their techniques and knowhow, seven trainees from Africa visited the company in July 2015.

“We set up a Quality Control Circle in each section, through which the staff identify agendas of their work team and try to solve them by themselves,” explains Hideki Hara, a lecturer of the training. At the factory, a number of methods created out of staffs’ ideas are now in use, such as posting working process and safety measures in the workplace, and managing component parts by putting number tags on the boxes. Having observed the factory for one hour, the trainees commented: “I learned that all of these were simple initiatives”, “I want to share the importance of quality control in my home country.”

Kaizen is a system to continuously review working methods such as improving work efficiency and securing safety, through the ideas of workers on the site. This concept “Made in Japan” was actively adapted at production workplaces during the period of rapid economic growth after World War II, and is now widely applied in many developing countries. Against this background, the JICA training courses focusing on Kaizen, which include visits to Japanese companies, are highly popular among developing countries. While Kaizen is now widely known as wisdom originated in Japan, it did not happen without challenges.

THE FIRST STEP TO THE WORLD

It was back in 1983 that the Productivity Improvement Project of Singapore was launched with Japan’s support. Singapore’s then-Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew had heard of the Kaizen movement in Japan and took interest in it. For JICA, it was the first project in the area of productivity improvement focusing on human resource development. It was also a starting point where Kaizen took off to the world. However, it was not immediately accepted by



Jinnosuke Miyai, then-Director-General of Japan Productivity Center, shakes hands with a Singaporean worker in charge, showing gratitude for the project.

the local people. In Singapore where the American style of rational, result-oriented production was the norm, the Japanese way which does not bring about tangible results straight away was not understood. The Japanese experts then decided to emphasize “practice” rather than “training”; they showed examples by taking such small initiatives as organizing work tools and taking stocks, and the concept gradually set it in place. It has now penetrated enough to be regarded as a Singaporean culture.

“The Kaizen was highly in need when Japan and other Asian countries were in their respective rapid economic growth periods. It is the African countries which are experiencing such a period today,” says Seiji Sugimoto (Japan Development Service Co., Ltd.), a JICA expert who has been involved in a number of Kaizen projects in different developing countries. After a success in Singapore, Kaizen has spread to countries in the Middle East, Central and South America and Africa. In one such country, Ethiopia, Sugimoto serves as the chief advisor of the project. “In Ethiopia, the composition ratio of the Secondary Industry against GDP is only a little more than 10%. The manufacturing industry is as low as around 5%. The main issues were the weak product planning ability and the low awareness of the importance of quality control. So, I thought Kaizen would be effective.”

KAIZEN METHODS ADAPTED TO EACH FIRM

The project was launched in 2009. Firstly, some 30 model companies were selected, and a survey conducted as to whether Kaizen made any differences in improvement of quality and productivity.



Working process and notices are clearly posted at a company where a Kaizen training was conducted.



Sugimoto working on a project in Argentina (the third person from left)

After one year and a half of basic training of knowledge and technical guidance, Kaizen was proven to be effective for the enterprises. As a next step, the number of model companies was increased to about 200 and selected from various industries including woodwork, metal processing, garment and food manufacturing. The efforts were initiated to spread Kaizen throughout the country.

One of the goals was to train local consultants who would be capable to instruct Kaizen. Sugimoto thus visited along with them small and micro enterprises, aiming to give them on-the-job training opportunities. He soon faced, however, a first wall. When he asked company managers “what kind of problems do you have?” most of them replied “We have no problems.” While they are aware of the fact that their product quality and productivity were low, the managers often do not take them as issues of their workplaces. He then reformulated his question, taking advantage of his previous Kaizen-dissemination experience, and asked: “What would you like to improve?” The company managers replied by starting to talk about the problems they face, such as “I would like to get rid of uneven coatings”, or “I would like to reduce defective products.” Sugimoto says: “Needless to say, everybody wants to make good products, therefore it is crucial to let them

know how important Kaizen is and motivate them for it. We try refraining from giving guidance directly to the companies, and prioritize human resource development, namely training local trainers.”

Through this process, it was gradually made clear that the reasons for low quality or low productivity vary from company to company. For instance, at a concrete manufacturing company, workers needed to carry heavy concrete blocks from one end of the factory to the other, due to its layout. “Quite a few companies did not consider workplace layout, such as the locations of equipment or condition of pathways, which posed problems in terms of efficiency as well as safety. When the layout was improved and made more adequate, some companies saw a jump of productivity by 40 percent.”

What is considered normal in Japan is not necessarily so in Ethiopia. “I realized that work tools are often not neatly organized. On one occasion, the work halted for half an hour in order to look for a driver.” An efficient method to deal with such a case is so-called 5S: Sort, Set in Order, Shine, Standardize and Sustain. This method does not require any large-scale equipment or facilities, and can be easily practiced by anyone. It was introduced by a number of companies and brought about good effects in areas such as work efficiency.



At a concrete brick manufacturing plant in which their floor layout was a problem, a Kaizen guidance was given showing a floor plan.



The work floor is neatly organized, following the introduction of the 5S scheme.

“MR. KAIZEN”, A POWERFUL PARTNER

Meanwhile, Kenji Fujita (Japan Productivity Center), vice chief adviser of the project, assisted in establishing an organization which allows a continuous practice of Kaizen, in collaboration with relevant local ministries. Fujita, who tries to have local people’s perspective, says, “I have an experience of having been involved in projects in Tunisia and Kenya, in which I explained the importance of Kaizen to the administrators by organizing seminars and developing training materials. I also gave advice for future organizational structures. I would like to apply the knowledge here in Ethiopia.”

The institution in which an organization is to be established is Ethiopia Kaizen Institute (EKI), under the umbrella of the Ministry of Industry. EKI consists of about 100 staff, including administrators



Fujita working on a project in Kenya. He explains the importance of Kaizen to the ministry officials and members of the employers’ association.

and consultants. Among them, a man nicknamed “Mr. Kaizen” is a key person of the project. It is Getahun Tadesse, Director-General of EKI. Sugimoto reveals that Tadesse is extremely earnest to spread Kaizen and very eager to learn. “Last year, he brought me a paper on Kaizen he drafted and asked for my comments. He was very grateful when I gave some advice and comments. I was impressed by his eagerness.”

Currently, a long-term operational plan of EKI is being developed. There too, Director-General Getahun is an active leading member. “Director-General Getahun asked me to list up Kaizen techniques, in order for him to formulate a vision and strategies which are going to be the basis of the plan. We then sorted out the Kaizen methods into steps depending on the degree of difficulty in understanding and application, and discussed them many times. He is probably over 60 years old, but is full of energy. I think he is going to be a central figure of Kaizen dissemination.” Sugimoto has a high expectation of him.

These efforts have borne fruit; in Ethiopia, the term Kaizen is now widely known among the people. The productivity and quality of enterprises have surely improved. The project, now at its final stage, aims to further strengthen EKI in the next five years, as well as to introduce more advanced Kaizen methods to companies, under the powerful initiative of the enthusiastic Ethiopian government. Sugimoto says, “It is precisely in the developing countries in which the fund procurement is a big issue that Kaizen methods are effective. I would like to continue making efforts with the local staff.”

The Kaizen method was born on the manufacturing floor in Japan, and then went overseas and developed in Singapore. It is now applied not only in the factories in various parts of the world, but also on such scenes as medical practices. This “Japan Brand” reflecting the Japanese spirit will continue to be communicated to the world.



A certificate of completion is presented to an Ethiopian company which worked on Kaizen. The efforts to disseminate the concept throughout the nation continue to be made.