

KAIZEN

Mark Wheeler – Chief Operating Officer, Driver Trett explores the Japanese principle of Kaizen. He outlines how the application of continuous improvement contributes to the success of specific projects or a wider business

I was recently asked to speak to a group of senior directors within a client organisation, not about a technical construction-related topic, nor about a form of contract or method of dispute resolution, but about leadership. These people were expected to develop into the future leaders of the business concerned, and I was very happy to go along and share some ideas.

Specifically, I was asked what I have done in my role to make our business better, with examples. Appraisal time...

We don't make any widgets. We don't deliver any boxes. We don't design anything that can be built or made. Consultancy is about getting the best people you can to work together, and develop themselves individually and as a team into something that really adds value to your clients. While we have done that very well for nearly forty years it's very hard to demonstrate, to a room full of sharp and inquisitive minds, exactly how.

I know from working with various teams around the world that the quality and presentation of our work has improved. However, every job is different and almost everything we do is confidential and may not be shared without a client's prior consent.

That said, it did not take long to identify an example where I had applied some continuous improvement. When we purchased Trett Consulting in 2012, the company came with a great external newsletter called the 'Trett Digest'. The last issue before we inherited the publication into the joined business was printed on white paper, with a two-colour cover, the inside pages were simply black and white with fonts sized to fill the page. No images were included. Clients enjoyed reading about developing topics in adjudication, and claims etc., from a knowledgeable team of staff authors. In June 2013, the first edition was published under the Driver Trett banner. We had moved to full colour and included photographs for the first time, but kept the newsletter feel and format.

We have a great marketing team in the business, based in both Dubai in the UAE and Bristol in the UK. The marketing office in Bristol has the advantage (for me)

of being just 20 metres from my own office. When we made a commitment to produce a Digest twice a year, I set out a rule that we would not publish an issue unless it was, in some small but demonstrable way, better than the last. This rule has caused some tensions in the past but it has been observed. It is a policy sometimes called 'Kaizen', a Japanese management culture of continuous improvement. We have moved from plain paper to a satin finish that has a high-quality feel, the front is now a cover giving a magazine feel, the covers are now high gloss. An online version is also available. The content has also increased in quality. We have a technical editor, from the very top of the management team, reviewing every article, a copy editor who helps deliver the first draft to a great standard, and a graphics team that use the best quality images, including an increasing number of our own origin.

Each edition has a wide range of technical topics, which are balanced between the disciplines we cover, and across each region of the globe in which we operate. The result is a publication of which the whole firm is justly proud, clients often mention it in glowing terms, and candidates coming to interview also mention the Digest as setting us apart, in terms of quality, from the competition. Circulation has increased from 7,500 to over 32,000 worldwide and we have a waiting list of guest authors from related businesses.

I held up the last ten copies of the Digest and explained the process to the group of senior directors, and then showed them the first edition and the last edition side-by-side. We have gone from a good newsletter to a globally published high-end magazine in just four years. The difference is very clear to see. All of this comes from a commitment to continuously improve what we are doing. Now I am not claiming to be a black belt in Kaizen, but I do know that it is in the culture of the business now. When the next draft lands on my desk for review, I know something about it will be better than the last one. It might be a small change, but it will be there. These small changes add up over time, and make a real difference.

The Digest definitely adds value to our business. Last year I went to a client meeting. Due to a combination of

the meetings running late and my early arrival, I shared the lawyer's waiting room with a direct competitor there to pitch for the same job. Sat eye-to-eye, I casually flipped through the magazines on the coffee table in front of us to discover two copies of the latest Digest. I looked up with a smile, and my opposite number sighed as he muttered, "...you lot get everywhere!".

