AN EXAMINATION OF KAIZEN DRIFT IN JAPANESE GENBA:

IMPLICATIONS FOR BUSINESS IN THE ANGLOSPHERE

A THESIS PRESENTED IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT

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ABSTRACT

In attempting to decode the industrial competitive success of Japan, researchers in the Anglosphere have predominantly identified with the highly visible tools and methods of the quality management philosophy of kaizen. However, due to data collection methodologies and significant cross-cultural limitations kaizen appears to have been largely misinterpreted and misunderstood. This ‘gap’ has resulted in literature riddled with deterministic models of mechanical methodologies promoted to pursue business excellence. Further, there has been a plethora of attempts at transplanting Japan-centric tools and techniques, with little – if any – regard for the country’s individual and indigenous social characteristics.

To deepen understanding of kaizen a phenomenological study was conducted in middle-to-large sized industrial companies in Japan to investigate Japanese workers’ perspectives of kaizen. Two parallel and complementary philosophies of the pursuit of business excellence were identified. The Japanese thread explored how Japanese workers acknowledge and exercise kaizen; and, the Anglosphere thread examined how workers in the Anglosphere attempt to adopt and practise kaizen. In the Japanese context, society is identified as being highly bounded with little opportunity for individual creativity. Many Japanese industrial organisations, being active kaizen environments, channel worker creativity and expressions of individuality into bounded environments, or kaizen audiences, providing a counter-point to social and cultural requirements. In addition to Japanese-style management, this has resulted in the production of tangible kaizen tools and methods, as easily identified by Anglosphere researchers and practitioners.

The primary contribution to knowledge this research presents is the development of understanding of the utility of the kaizen phenomenon. Kaizen in industrial settings in Japan is found to be both culturally bounded and contextually dependent, and far beyond continuous improvement; differences in the perceptions of older and younger workers are seen to exist as kaizen drifts across generational boundaries; active programmes are maintained to ensure that kaizen remains embedded in both the individual and the organisation; and, the simplistic diffusion of kaizen to
Anglosphere organisations is observed to be an unlikely guarantee to sustainable business excellence over the longer term, as it has in Japan. This research reports that the only likely viable means to sustainably diffuse kaizen in Anglosphere domains is for business leaders to return to *square one* and instil an implicit, comprehensive understanding and appreciation of kaizen; and, acquire and develop recipient-organisation-centric tools and methods. Such a new approach could provide practitioners in the Anglosphere the means to adopt and sustain kaizen thinking and practice, and a gateway to sustainable competitive advantage.

Keywords:
Anglosphere, conformity, creativity, culture, diffusion, drift, genba, intergenerational, Japan, kaizen
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My DBA Journey originally sought discovery of the enablers and drivers of the Japanese economic miracle. Enquiry soon identified the underpinning Japanese philosophy of kaizen, not as a theory of explanation but as a metaphor for understanding. Beginning with a series of generalist questions and progressing through to academic enquiry, this study has provided abundant fruit, and I would like to take this opportunity to acknowledge a very special circle of people who have provided invaluable knowledge and support. Unfortunately, these words will not truly express my appreciation for the contributions and encouragement received.

My wonderful wife Hiromi initiated the first step of this journey after late night discussions contemplating answers to questions, suggesting the research topic of kaizen. She was an invaluable soundboard and source of both Japanese and Anglosphere experience and insight. She allowed me frequent travel from Japan to New Zealand to undertake coursework and research. In the weekends, she gave me time off from family duties to hit the books by entertaining our daughters Amy and Emma at a park or friend’s house. Thanks for the Eureka moments. I am very much looking forward to repaying this tremendous debt.

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to its bare bones. Heather (Massey University) allowed me to delve into my holistic and experiential understanding of Japan by providing the means to view and interpret cross-culturalism and the holistic nature of my ideology. Tony (Eastern New Mexico University) provided definitive data reduction and interpretation methodology; and, through cumulative practitioner and academic knowledge and experience, many of the necessary building blocks required along the way. He was also an unmatched source of insight into the phenomenon that is Japan, assisting me to interpret my reality as an embedded foreigner.

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ATTESTATION OF AUTHORSHIP

I hereby declare that this submission is my own work. To the best of my knowledge and belief all previously published material has been appropriately acknowledged herein, and the work on which the thesis is based has not been accepted either in part or in whole for any other degree or diploma at an institution of higher education.

Wayne Macpherson, DBA Candidate
**BIOGRAPHY**

Undertaking postgraduate study, being employed by Japanese corporations, and working within active kaizen environments over the last twenty years has provided me with unique insight into the holistic nature of Japan and the Japanese people. This motivated me to seek a deeper understanding of the Japanese quality management philosophy of kaizen through unhindered enquiry of those working in active kaizen environments. In addition to Japanese language and Japanese cultural fluency (should that be possible for a Westerner), I am able to adopt my home New Zealand Kiwi culture or adopted Japanese culture at will. That being, I can wear the mask I see fit: think and act Western, think Japanese but act Western, think Western but act Japanese, or think and act Japanese. My multicultural identity allows for in-depth enquiry and understanding, and subsequent articulation in a language that my audience can understand. It also allows for the removal of outside translators from the cross-language, cross-culture equation; and, for continuous drilling down in the attainment of deep and confirmed understanding by asking why, why, why, why, why, why, and why?