

Personal Kaizen: 15 Tips for your continuous improvement

Kaizen (改善) means "improvement" — "kai" (改) means change/make better, and "zen" (善) means good — but as the term is used as a business process it more closely resembles in English "continuous improvement." Kaizen is one of the keys to the steady improvement and innovation found at successful companies in Japan such as Toyota. Says Matthew May, in his book [The Elegant Solution: Toyota's Formula for Mastering Innovation](#), "Kaizen is one of those magical concepts that is at once a philosophy, a principle, a practice, and a tool." Though Kaizen is a tool used by corporations to achieve greater innovation, productivity, and general excellence, it's also *an approach*, an approach that we can learn from and apply to our own lives as we strive for continuous improvement on a more personal level. We can call this "Personal Kaizen." Others have applied the personal kaizen approach to personal efficiency or GTD. You too can take the spirit of kaizen and apply it to your own unique personal kaizen approach to improve — step-by-step, little-by-little — your design mindfulness, knowledge, and skill.

Long-term commitment

The overriding principles of kaizen is that it is daily, continuous, steady, and it takes the long-term view. Kaizen also requires a commitment and a strong willingness to change. I suggest you incorporate these principles into your own personal kaizen approach to learning all you can about design and visual communication over the long term. The interesting thing about kaizen is that big, sudden improvements are not necessary. Instead, what is important is that you're always looking for ideas — including even the smallest of things — that you can build on. Tiny improvements are OK; over the long-term these add up to great improvements. Each journey begins with a single step — this too is a precept inherent in Kaizen. Keep moving forward.

No end to improvement

There is an old saying that goes "Once you think you have arrived, you have already started your descent." One must never think they "have arrived." In the West we say "If it ain't broke, don't fix it." But the spirit of kaizen suggests that there is *always* something to learn and ways to improve, and that it is also better to prevent problems than to fix them. So, no matter how good things may seem now, there is always room for improvement, and looking to improve every day is what the spirit of personal kaizen is all about. It's not about how far you have come or how far you have yet to go, it is only about this moment and being open to seeing the lessons around you, and possessing the capacity and willingness to learn and improve. There are many small things you can do to increase your design mindfulness and skills over time. Here are 15 tips in no particular order.

(1) Keep an analog scrapbook of design examples you find. From napkins to paper cups to business cards and brochures, flyers, and posters — whatever you find remarkable (good or bad) and fits inside a folder, a box, or a scrapbook. From time to time, review the contents of your analog examples and reflect on what works (and what doesn't) and why. This activity is even better in a group where people occasionally come together and share their scrapbook contents with others in a kind of "examples of design show and tell."

(2) Keep a digital scrapbook in the form of an online photo blog — either private or open to anyone to view — where you log all the examples of design you find of interest. Usually you can take a snap and then upload it to your blog right from your phone.

(3) Get out of your comfort zone. Participate in something creative that others may think is out of character for you. If you're always comfortable, you probably are not growing. Dare to be weird (at least sometimes).

(4) Keep stimulating the "right side" of your brain by learning a musical instrument, or rediscovering the instrument you used to play. Playing music is one of those creative "whole mind" activities that will enrich your life (and work). You are never too old to learn to play an instrument.

(5) Read books on graphic design, typography, color, photography, documentary film making, and even architecture and other areas of design — you never know where the design lessons are to be found.

(6) Take some time to examine the packages in stores regardless of whether or not you are interested in the product. What catches your eye as you walk through a shop? Nothing is by accident — what were the designers trying to communicate with the package?

(7) Learn to draw by taking a class using the methods of [Betty Edwards](#) (or [buy her books and videos](#)). Get Dan Roam's [The Back of the Napkin](#) and learn how to draw and talk at the same time at the whiteboard. **(8) Learn to take better photos**. Since you'll be taking so many snaps to learn from and to share, why not get much better at the art of photography? [Scott Kelby's books](#) may be a good place to start. You don't have to become as good as the pros, but you can get much, much better. Learn what separates the great photos from the ordinary. The lessons from photography will help in your general quest to become a better visual thinker.

(9) Take an art class at the local community college or university. Don't worry that it may not have "obvious applications for work." The art — whatever it is — will teach you lessons about seeing and communicating through form. All you need to do is practice and enjoy the journey. You'll find, perhaps unexpectedly, that there were indeed lessons in there that you later applied to your own work or personal life.

(10) Go for long walks alone (with ability to record your observations). As you walk, if an idea snaps into your head or you notice something that stimulates your imagination, use the voice recorder in your phone (or other device) to record the idea. It may seem odd, but I often even go jogging with my iPhone just in case I need to take a snap of something remarkable or an idea comes to mind that I need to record instantly. Besides relieving stress and keeping you fit, exercise seems to stimulate ideas. Record those ideas when possible in a way easiest for you.

(11) Get completely unplugged and off the grid — no iPhones or BlackBerrys, etc. — and go for a walk, a hike, a bike ride, or whatever it is that allows you slow your busy mind. And what if that brilliant idea hits you and you can't record it in any way or take a picture of a remarkable example? Don't worry about it. Getting off the grid and freeing up your mind (and pockets) is necessary too.

(12) Make it a point to watch TED videos on line, especially those related to [design](#) and [creativity](#); many of the presenters also use very effective, well-designed visuals. Subscribe to the TED RSS feed or follow [TED on Twitter](#). Don't forget that many presentations [have been translated](#).

(13) Go for walks in nature with a keen eye for the balance and the colors, lines, shapes, etc. that most people never pay attention to. What visual lessons can you get by stopping to look both at the whole and then zooming in to look at the particular? There is much to be learned by careful observation of nature. Artists already do this, but we can too.

(14) Teach others what you learn. One of the best ways to deepen and solidify your new knowledge is to teach it to others. Give a presentation, run a seminar, teach a class, or volunteer to run a small internal workshop to teach others in your organization what you are learning. Real learning occurs when you share it.

(15) Share your new knowledge and passion about design in a short presentation at your local [Pecha Kucha Night](#), [Ignite night](#), [TEDx conference](#), [Users Group meeting](#), or even your local [Toastmasters](#) meeting, and other associations. The more you share and the more you get out to these events, the more you learn. There are many more things you can do to continuously

improve and grow over the long-term. What are some of the things that work for you? I also asked this question on Posterous — [checkout the good suggestions](#) by others there as well.

Related books • [One Small Step Can Change Your Life: The Kaizen Way](#) • [The Toyota Way](#)