In an era driven by conspicuous consumption, early obsolescence of goods and service delivery mechanisms, and an emphasis on specialization/isolation of employee tasks, we have emphasized quantity instead of quality. While American carmakers unfortunately flounder, for example, Japanese manufacturers such as Toyota continue to flourish. What is the secret? And how can we build upon what Dr. William Deming revolutionized—an American approach by the U.S. Government to help the Japanese after World War II.

Ultimately for businesses, both governmental and private sector, to succeed in the twenty-first century, we must all rethink how we do business. In the vast web of our interconnectedness—within the United States, between nations, and with the earth—all levels, from abstract information to concrete resources must align with paradigms of business that support and enhance quality and stability in preference to quantity and waste.

In Frontline Supervisor’s 2009 volume of four articles, “The Quality Quotient,” we first explore Kaizen, an example of continuous improvement at work. Second, we take a look at the nature of improvement—how to get it done. Third, we ask how to maximize personal and corporate energy, and finally, we probe the concept of synergy—what it is and how it works.

Although Kaizen, or continuous improvement, returned from Japan to the United States in the 1970’s and 80’s, it has not yet been adopted on a wide enough scale to provide all of its benefits to a broad enough sector of employers.

Kaizen affects all levels of an organization, improving the performance of managers as well as employees. It results in higher employee morale, safety and retention rates, as well as better communication between all levels within an organization.
Implementation processes and customer relations also benefit from the utilization of the six fundamental concepts of Kaizen. They are:

- Kaizen is a philosophy applied to personal and professional life.
- Kaizen follows the Deming Improvement Cycle, similar to the scientific method most people study in high school.
- Kaizen is continuous. Changes, improvements, are anticipated on a daily basis.
- Kaizen is evolutionary rather than revolutionary because this kind of change is incremental and non-disruptive.
- Improvement is defined broadly as increasing the value to the customer as well as decreasing the resources or effort or time invested by the company.
- Enhanced performance means that the overall production of goods or services occurs with maximum effectiveness and efficiency.

When these fundamentals operate in a workplace, the relationships between supervisors or managers and their employees create a learning environment. Cross-trained employees better understand how one process or task interfaces with another. Greater knowledge of the entire process makes it more possible to prevent mistakes or defects.

In a learning environment, managers ask their employees to identify and try to solve problems in a cooperative effort. They ask, “How can we improve our performance?” In this thoughtful environment it is understood that the process determines the quality of the product. A sloppy process produces a sloppy product or service. A process involves operators using equipment and materials according to certain methods. The ultimate goal is optimization. Next time we will take a look at some examples of process improvement.