

Quite Bowled Over

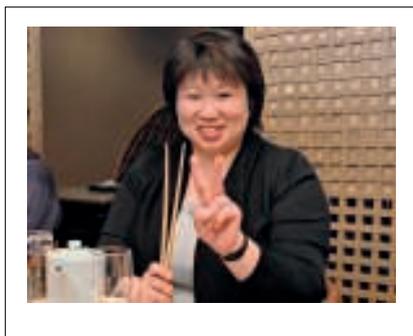
● In Japan, you have to take your shoes off—and not just when you're visiting a restaurant. As a rule, anyone who makes their way to the motherland of Kaizen to attend the Porsche Consulting seminar comes back profoundly impressed. 14 employees of the Benteler Group, which has enjoyed worldwide success in the field of automotive engineering, among other fields, also dared to confront Japanese production methods—and accumulated entirely new experiences.

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It is not true that Japan and Europe have absolutely nothing in common. As in tradition-conscious Great Britain, Japanese traffic drives on the left, the legal system has many parallels with the German justice system, and this winter the inhabitants of the island of Hokkaido were worried about the same thing as everyone in Europe: In Sapporo, proud venue of the 1972 Olympic Games, there was far too little snow. However, on the evening in ques-

tion, as ladies in kimonos served sushi and other secrets of the ocean, along with cold noodle soup and sake, the matter in hand was a Japanese invention which has little by little also been gaining ground in Europe: Kaizen. The men, who had made themselves comfortable in their sock feet on the floor, discussed the issue vehemently. It was a day of contention, with the mood fluctuating between ill-humour, uncertainty and curiosity. ▶



Impressions from a trip to Japan: If you want to experience Kaizen, you also have to get to know the country and its people

The interpreters, Christoph Törring and Oliver Loidl, were kept busy. The ladies accompanying the expedition, tour leader Chieko Sato and organiser Hiromi Tanaka from Porsche Engineering in Japan, mediated as best as they could. In the early afternoon, while visiting successful Japanese automotive supplier Keihin Seimitsu Kogyo Co. Ltd. (KSK), after just under an hour's investigation, the guests from Germany, 14 executives and production specialists from the Benteler Group, had worked in two groups to put forward proposals for improving a chaku-chaku production line which manufactures an aluminium gearbox part. The objective of the task was to change the production method to make it possible for two workers, instead of three as before, to make the desired number of parts. It seemed to the German guests that their proposals were not effective enough for the established Japanese Kaizen experts. Norbert Bergs, from Benteler Steel/Tube, and management spokesman, voiced a criticism which was representative of everyone's view: "Too little time and too little information to work out an optimum solution."

The advisers from Porsche Consulting are familiar with this type of discussion—and were opposed to it. Hanne Dinkel, Dietmar Kehr, Bernd Würsching and Andreas Baier remained tough, and even hit back provoca-

tively: "Did your team work well together?" Or: "Did you really approach this in a structured manner?" And: "Did you actually concentrate on the essential points?" Keiji Fujisaki, a host and director at KSK, listened, smiled gently and wisely, and said "You must be patient." Then he and Norbert Bergs put their heads together. While the dialogue was taking place at the highest levels here, the hard work was being done just under an hour's drive north-east of Sapporo; at KSK's factory, the workers were implementing the German proposals on the production line immediately.

This was when the guests finally arrived in Japan. The hour of truth: German production specialists encountered Japanese production methods. There is a difference between resolving to strive for a non-wasteful company which implements a continuous improvement process and internalizing the philosophy and actually living in a consistent manner. The realization can be difficult, but it is instructive in any event. Bernd Würsching, who is familiar with customers' sensitivities in this strange world after twelve stays in Japan, says: "Time and again, it is remarkable how towards the end of the trip the initial scepticism changes into motivation to implement many measures back home in exactly the same way that visitors have seen them done here."





The round of introductions: Keiji Fujisaki (centre, right-hand photo) provides the German guests with a first insight into the world of KSK

The seminars in Japan are much sought after by Porsche Consulting’s customers. There is great appeal in being able to experience lean production and lean management close up in the motherland of Kaizen. The doctrine of constant small changes for the better enabled its inventor, Toyota, to become the world’s largest and most successful car manufacturer. Although the Toyota production system (TPS) is not ubiquitous, even in Japan, it is very widespread. In Europe, Porsche used it at the beginning of the 1990s to achieve its economic turnaround, and Porsche Consulting has been teaching its clients the

recipe for success ever since—and has been bringing them back here to its roots again and again.

A cultural crash course, which also includes a visit to the spectacular heritage site of Kyoto, lasts 12 days. However, the trip mostly consists of visits to companies which are living the Kaizen ideal, and are always very proud of this. To make something like this possible, you have to have good relationships, or, best of all, real friends. Tetsuro Komaba, the owner of KSK, is a real friend of the House of Porsche. He became an earnest ▶





A factory visit: German experts cast a keen eye over Japanese production lines

Kaizen fan during his time at Toyota and subsequently, against his father's wishes, restructured his own family firm. Komaba is always striving for something new. His credo is "We want to do things that no one has dared to do yet." At KSK's parent plant in Tochigi, he had an analogue production line built with old machines in order to sharpen the five senses of his employees despite the existence of ultramodern production technology. At the Hokkaido plant, KSK receives guests constantly in order to demonstrate Kaizen to them and also teach it at workshops. "New ideas from outside revitalize Kaizen," says Tetsuro Komaba. "When people who pursue the same ideas come together, there should be no secrets."

On this occasion, the guests from Germany were of particular interest to the Japanese. Benteler has more than 21,000 employees at 150 sites in 34 countries. In 2005, the Paderborn-based company had a turnover of far in excess of five billion euro, 70 per cent of which was earned outside Germany, and 72 per cent of which was accounted for by automotive engineering alone. Other divisions include Steel/Tube and Distribution and Purchasing. Consequently, the group was a diverse mix of people. It included specialists from the Steel/Tube and

Automotive engineering divisions, and was enriched by employees from the USA, Spain and Brazil. In the words of Norbert Bergs, "We want to see things here which we can use to convince our colleagues at home that Kaizen is necessary."

The first impressions gained at the KSK Hokkaido plant made the visitors want to see more: the perfect visualization of the work at virtually every piece of machinery, clarity and transparency in the ever-changing architecture. The production lines are called Himawari (sunflower) and Nanakamado (the mountain ash which is typical of Hokkaido) because (as Komaba puts it) "after all, plant names are a lot more pleasant than just numbers". The subsequent sandwich training served as an illustrative "just in time" simulation: First of all, KSK members produced four types of sandwich using the conventional performance-orientated production method. This resulted in high levels of stock between each production stage and a long storage time for the finished products—not exactly ideal for a sandwich. Production was optimized in several steps "without large investments" and with a mix of high-tech and simple methods—ranging up to interlinked processes using new ▶



“The hungrier you are the better you work”: Sandwich training along with reorganization measures as an illustrative “just in time” simulation



Norbert Bergs thanks Tetsuro Komaba—and then it's time to say goodbye

working materials and kanban control, which monitors supplies directly via customers' consumption. Jokingly, Komaba declared that the recipe for success in the Kaizen exercise, in which the German guests also energetically buttered bread, was "The hungrier you are the better you work."

If the practical visual instruction component was aimed at the stomach, the task on the chaku-chaku line the following day was more likely to upset the stomach. After the line had been analysed with the aid of a standard work combination sheet (see the following article),

fierce discussions about the proposals for improvements began, an intensive exchange of views which continued late into the evening in the restaurant.

This heightened the surprise the next day: at 12 o'clock, high noon, the KSK production line was already running at high speed again—quite accurately adapted to the proposals put forward by the Benteler tour group. The objective had been attained.

The guests' joy about this was exceeded by their surprise at the Japanese approach. In the words of Dr Klaus

Hauschulte, Benteler Operating Systems Manager and Kaizen officer, “The way the Japanese responded to our proposals and the discipline, consistency and speed with which they implemented them were striking.” American David Vanzoest also confessed that it had made a strong impression on him: “It’s very unusual for us to do something and then see what happens, but this is exactly what we need to take away: the idea of simply testing things out.” Keiji Fujisaki explained the underlying mindset thus: “We Japanese don’t spend a lot of time considering what might go wrong. We solve problems when they occur.”

Like all the participants, Brazilian Rogerio Guedes was impressed by the hosts’ openness and drew his own conclusions: “The basis for everything is discipline, consistency and the conviction that something can always be improved. We need to convince our top managers that this system works, because one of the reasons that Kaizen is so successful here in Japan is that the managers know exactly what they’re talking about.”

Summing up experiences at KSK, Norbert Bergs said “The high level of quality awareness, the cleanliness, the discipline and consistency that we have seen—these are

the topics we have to work on.” For Klaus Hauschulte, one insight above all was very important: “We have seen that Kaizen isn’t rocket science. You simply have to do it.”

There were hearty farewell waves as the party left KSK—more than just a sign of politeness. The initial phase of the tour was intensive and successful. The doubts disappeared. And the group still had eight days left in which to experience Japan, days in which the German guests had their socks blown off a few more times, and not just when eating in the evenings. ◀

