

MY WEIRD PROMPTS

Podcast Transcript

EPISODE #119

The 1% Rule: Mastering Kaizen for Lasting Improvement

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EPISODE SYNOPSIS

Are you feeling the end-of-year pressure to "move fast and break things"? In this episode of My Weird Prompts, Herman and Corn dive deep into the Japanese philosophy of Kaizen to help listener Daniel overcome the urge to rush through projects. They break down the history of the Toyota Production System, the math behind the "1% rule," and practical frameworks like the PDCA cycle and 5S. Whether you're looking to optimize your workflow or just want to stop feeling behind, this episode offers a roadmap for sustainable, compounding growth. Learn why the smallest tweaks often lead to the most significant breakthroughs and how to build a "continuous improvement" mindset that lasts long after your New Year's resolutions fade.

DANIEL'S PROMPT

Daniel

"I'd love to discuss Kaizen, or continuous incremental improvement. I want to implement this philosophy more in my daily life because I tend to rush through projects to finish them as quickly as possible, which isn't always effective. I've seen the power of making small, consistent improvements over time—for example, this podcast took many daily tweaks to get to a point where it's actually fun to listen to. I'm looking for ways to deliberately use Kaizen and any productivity frameworks built around it. What would you recommend I look into as I head into 2026?"

TRANSCRIPT

Corn

Welcome to My Weird Prompts! I am Corn, and I am so glad you are joining us today for another deep dive into the things that make our brains tick. I am sitting here in our living room in Jerusalem with my brother, the man who probably has a spreadsheet for his spreadsheets.

Herman

Herman Poppleberry, at your service. And yes, Corn, the spreadsheets are organized by color and priority, as they should be. It is great to be back. We have a really interesting one today that actually hits quite close to home for us.

Corn

It really does. Our housemate Daniel sent this one in. He was talking about how he has been feeling this urge to rush through projects just to get them done, but he is realizing that might not be the most effective way to actually build something of quality. He wants us to talk about Kaizen, or continuous incremental improvement.

Herman

It is such a timely topic, especially as we are sitting here on December twenty-ninth, twenty-five, looking right at the start of twenty twenty-six. Everyone is thinking about New Year's resolutions and big, sweeping changes, but Kaizen is almost the exact opposite of that "new year, new me" explosion. It is much more quiet, much more methodical, and honestly, way more powerful in the long run.

Corn

I love that. And Daniel mentioned something that I think we should acknowledge right away. He said this podcast, My Weird Prompts, is actually a product of Kaizen. If you go back and listen to our very first recordings, well, maybe don't do that, but if you did, you would hear the difference. It wasn't one big "aha" moment that made the show work. It was hundreds of tiny tweaks to the audio, the flow, how we talk to each other.

Herman

Exactly. It is the aggregation of marginal gains. That is a phrase that comes up a lot in this world. But before we get into the productivity frameworks, we should probably ground this in where it actually comes from. Kaizen isn't just a buzzword from a productivity blog. It has deep roots in post-World War Two Japanese manufacturing, specifically with Toyota.

Corn

Right, and I think that is a crucial distinction. When people hear "manufacturing," they think of cold, hard assembly lines. But the philosophy behind it is actually deeply human. It is about the idea that the person doing the work is the best person to figure out how to improve the work.

Herman

Spot on. In the Toyota Production System, they have this concept where any worker on the line, regardless of their rank, can pull a cord, the Andon Cord, to stop the entire production line if they see a problem or an opportunity for improvement. Think about the bravery that takes! Stopping a multi-million dollar assembly line because you noticed a bolt could be tightened more efficiently. But that is Kaizen. It is the belief that no detail is too small to be improved.

Corn

That is fascinating, but I can see why Daniel struggles with it. We live in a culture of "move fast and break things." If you are stopping the line to fix a bolt, you aren't "finishing" the car. How do we reconcile that need for speed with the philosophy of tiny, slow improvements?

Herman

That is the big tension, isn't it? We have this psychological bias called "hyperbolic discounting." We value a small reward right now, like the feeling of finishing a project and checking it off a list, more than a much larger reward in the future, like having a truly world-class product. Rushing gives us that hit of dopamine today. Kaizen asks us to trade that quick hit for a long-term compounding effect.

Corn

It is like the difference between a firecracker and a slow-burning coal. The firecracker is exciting, but the coal keeps the house warm all night. So, if Daniel is heading into twenty twenty-six and wants to move away from that "rushing" mindset, where does he even start? It feels overwhelming to think about "improving everything" all at once.

Herman

You hit on the first trap right there. You cannot improve everything. Kaizen is actually about focus. One of the primary frameworks people use is called the PDCA cycle. It stands for Plan, Do, Check, Act. It sounds simple, but the magic is in the repetition.

Corn

Okay, walk me through that. Let's use the podcast as an example since Daniel brought it up. How would PDCA look for us?

Herman

Great example. "Plan" would be us saying, "I think our transitions between segments are a bit clunky." We don't try to rewrite the whole show format. We just focus on transitions. "Do" is us recording an episode where we consciously try a new way of transitioning. "Check" is the most important part that people usually skip. We actually listen back and ask, "Did that actually sound better, or was it just different?" And then "Act" is taking what we learned and making it the new standard.

Corn

I see. So the "Check" phase prevents you from just changing things for the sake of change. You are actually looking for evidence of improvement.

Herman

Exactly. Without the "Check" and "Act" phases, you are just iterating in a circle. With them, you are iterating in a spiral, moving upward every time. It is a subtle difference, but it is everything.

Corn

That makes a lot of sense. But I want to push back a bit. If I am Daniel and I am working on a software project or a piece of writing, sometimes I just need to hit "submit." Does Kaizen ever become an excuse for perfectionism? Can you "improve" something forever and never actually release it?

Herman

That is a really incisive question, Corn. And actually, the Kaizen philosophy argues the opposite. To improve something, it has to exist in the real world. You can't perform a PDCA cycle on a thought. You have to "Do" it. So, Kaizen actually encourages getting a "minimum viable product" out there quickly so that the improvement process can actually begin. The "rushing" Daniel mentioned is often about finishing and never looking back. Kaizen is about finishing and then immediately looking at it with a magnifying glass to see what the next tiny step is.

Corn

So it is not about "don't finish," it is about "don't abandon."

Herman

I love that. "Don't abandon." That should be on a t-shirt.

Corn

We should probably talk to Larry about that, though his t-shirts would probably be made of something questionable. Speaking of which, we should probably take a quick break for our sponsors.

Herman

Oh boy. Here we go. Larry: Are you tired of your thoughts moving at the speed of regular time? Do you wish you could finish your projects before you even started them? Introducing the Chronos-Sync Neural Headband. Using patented "maybe-science" and a series of vibrating crystals, the Chronos-Sync allows your brain to operate in a pocket dimension where one second of real time is actually forty-five minutes of deep-work time. Side effects may include deja vu, smelling colors, and a temporary belief that you are a nineteenth-century lighthouse keeper. The Chronos-Sync Neural Headband. Why wait for the future when you can live in it yesterday? Larry: BUY NOW!

Corn

Thanks, Larry. I think I'll stick to my regular, non-vibrating brain for now.

Herman

Yeah, I am pretty sure "smelling colors" is a sign you should see a doctor, not a productivity hack. Anyway, back to Kaizen.

Corn

Right. So we talked about the PDCA cycle. What are some other frameworks Daniel should look into as he prepares for twenty twenty-six? I have heard people talk about "Five S." Is that related?

Herman

It is! Five S is a cornerstone of Kaizen, specifically for organizing your environment so that improvement can happen naturally. It comes from five Japanese words: Seiri, Seiton, Seiso, Seiketsu, and Shitsuke. In English, we usually translate those as Sort, Set in order, Shine, Standardize, and Sustain.

Corn

Okay, let's break those down. "Sort" seems obvious. Get rid of the junk?

Herman

Exactly. If it doesn't add value, it is "Muda," which is the Japanese word for waste. In a digital sense, this is closing those fifty tabs Daniel probably has open or deleting the files he hasn't touched in three years.

Corn

I feel attacked. But go on. What is "Set in order"?

Herman

That is about "a place for everything and everything in its place." The goal is to reduce the "friction" of starting work. If Daniel has to spend ten minutes finding the right document or setting up his desk every time he wants to work, he is more likely to rush once he actually starts because he feels behind.

Corn

That is a huge point. Friction is the enemy of quality. If it is hard to do the work, you'll do a sloppy job just to get it over with.

Herman

Precisely. "Shine" is about keeping the workspace clean, which for us might mean literally dusting the microphones or figuratively clearing our desktops. "Standardize" is where it gets interesting for productivity. It means creating a repeatable process for the things you do often. If every time we record this podcast we have to reinvent how we do it, we aren't improving; we are just surviving.

Corn

And "Sustain" is the hardest one. That is the discipline to keep the other four going.

Herman

It is. And that is why Daniel's focus on Kaizen as a "philosophy" is so smart. It isn't a one-time cleanup. It is a daily habit. There is this famous math that people use to illustrate this. If you improve something by just one percent every single day, by the end of a year, you aren't just three hundred sixty-five percent better. Because of compounding, you are actually thirty-seven times better.

Corn

Thirty-seven times? That sounds like one of Larry's claims, Herman. Are you sure about the math?

Herman

I am positive. One point zero one to the power of three hundred sixty-five is approximately thirty-seven point eight. It is the same principle as compound interest in a bank account. Small, consistent additions lead to exponential growth. But the opposite is also true. If you get one percent worse every day, you decline almost to zero.

Corn

That is a sobering thought. It really highlights why "rushing" is so dangerous. If you rush and make a small mistake, and you don't use Kaizen to fix it, those mistakes start to compound too. You end up with a "technical debt" or a "creative debt" that eventually becomes impossible to pay off.

Herman

That is exactly what happens. In software, we see this all the time. A "quick fix" that isn't quite right leads to another quick fix, and five years later, the whole system is a mess that no one understands. Daniel is wise to want to tackle this now before his projects get to that point.

Corn

So let's get practical for him. He wants to implement this in his daily life for twenty twenty-six. We have the frameworks, but how does he overcome that internal "urge" to rush? That feeling of "I just need to be done with this"?

Herman

I think he should look into the "Two-Minute Rule" from David Allen's *Getting Things Done*, but with a Kaizen twist. If there is a tiny improvement he can make that takes less than two minutes, he should do it immediately. Don't add it to a list. Just tighten the bolt.

Corn

I like that. It builds the "muscle" of improvement. But what about the bigger stuff?

Herman

For the bigger stuff, I would recommend he starts a "Continuous Improvement Log." Just a simple notebook or a digital file. At the end of every work session, instead of just closing the laptop, he should spend exactly three minutes asking: "What is one tiny thing that was frustrating today, and how can I make it one percent better tomorrow?"

Corn

That is so manageable. It doesn't ask you to solve the whole problem. It just asks you to identify the next tiny step.

Herman

Right. And he should focus on "the gemba." That is another Japanese term from the Toyota days. It means "the real place." In manufacturing, it means the shop floor. For Daniel, it means the actual place where the work happens. Don't try to solve productivity problems by reading more books about productivity. Go to the "gemba." Look at your actual files, your actual desk, your actual schedule. That is where the improvements are hiding.

Corn

I think there is also a mindset shift here about what "finished" means. If Daniel can start seeing "finished" not as "I never have to look at this again," but as "this is now ready for the first round of improvement," it takes the pressure off. You don't have to get it perfect the first time if you know you have a system in place to make it better later.

Herman

That is the "Growth Mindset" in action. It is the realization that everything is a work in progress. Even the most successful companies in the world are still using Kaizen. Amazon, for example, is famous for its "Day One" philosophy. Jeff Bezos always said it is always "Day One" at Amazon because "Day Two" is stasis, followed by irrelevance, followed by decline. Kaizen is how you stay in "Day One."

Corn

It is funny you mention that. I was reading about the "British Cycling" team. They were notoriously bad for decades. Then they hired a guy named Dave Brailsford who applied this exact philosophy. He didn't try to find a better bike or a faster rider. He looked at tiny things. He found the pillows that gave the riders the best sleep. He taught them the most effective way to wash their hands so they wouldn't get sick. He even painted the inside of the team truck white so they could spot tiny bits of dust that might get into the bike mechanics.

Herman

And what happened?

Corn

They went from winning almost nothing to dominating the Tour de France and the Olympics for years. It wasn't one big change; it was a thousand tiny ones.

Herman

That is the most inspiring part of Kaizen. It democratizes excellence. You don't have to be a genius or have a million-dollar budget. You just have to be observant and consistent.

Corn

So, for Daniel, and for anyone else listening who feels that "rush" to get to the finish line, maybe the goal for twenty twenty-six shouldn't be "finish more projects." Maybe the goal should be "improve the process of doing projects."

Herman

I think that is a perfect way to frame it. If you improve the process, the results take care of themselves. It is like planting a garden. You can't "rush" a tomato. You can only improve the soil, the water, and the light. If the environment is right, the growth is inevitable.

Corn

I love that analogy. Especially here in Jerusalem, where we are always trying to get things to grow in this rocky soil. It takes a lot of "tiny improvements" to make a garden work here.

Herman

It really does. I spent three hours last weekend just moving stones one percent at a time.

Corn

And it looks one percent better, Herman. I promise.

Herman

I'll take it.

Corn

So, to recap for Daniel: Look into the PDCA cycle for your projects. Use the Five S framework to clear the friction from your environment. Start a tiny "Improvement Log" to build the habit. And most importantly, forgive yourself for not being perfect on the first try. The goal is "better than yesterday," not "perfect forever."

Herman

And remember that compounding math. Thirty-seven times better in a year. That is a massive transformation that starts with a single, tiny, almost invisible change today.

Corn

Well, I think that is a great place to wrap this up. Daniel, thank you for the prompt. It gave us a lot to think about for our own work as we head into the new year.

Herman

Definitely. I am already looking at my desk and seeing at least three things I can "Sort" right now.

Corn

Just don't throw away my headphones again, Herman.

Herman

Those were "Muda," Corn. They were taking up valuable space.

Corn

They were "essential equipment"! Anyway, thank you all for listening to My Weird Prompts. We hope this gives you some fuel for your own incremental improvements as we move into twenty twenty-six.

Herman

You can find us on Spotify and at our website, myweirdprompts dot com. There is an RSS feed there if you want to subscribe, and a contact form if you want to send us a prompt like Daniel did. We love hearing from you.

Corn

We really do. This has been a human-AI collaboration, and we are looking forward to making it one percent better next time.

Herman

See you in twenty twenty-six.

Corn

Happy New Year, everyone. Take it slow, and keep improving. Bye!

Herman

Bye!