



“For me, Continuous Improvement is ...

Ludger Althoff

Living up to Life

Leica
MICROSYSTEMS

Ludger Althoff is 43 years old and married. He has three children and lives in Paderborn, Germany. From 2001, Althoff held a variety of positions at Danaher and since 1 December 2005, he has been Global Operations Vice President of Leica Microsystems and a DBS Leader – a practice that he has known for years and actively pursued since his days at Colfax Corporation.



... the ceaseless drive to make each effort better than the last.”

Mr. Althoff, before we talk about the personal significance that Continuous Improvement has for you, could you briefly tell us about your functions as Global Operations Vice President and Danaher Business Leader?

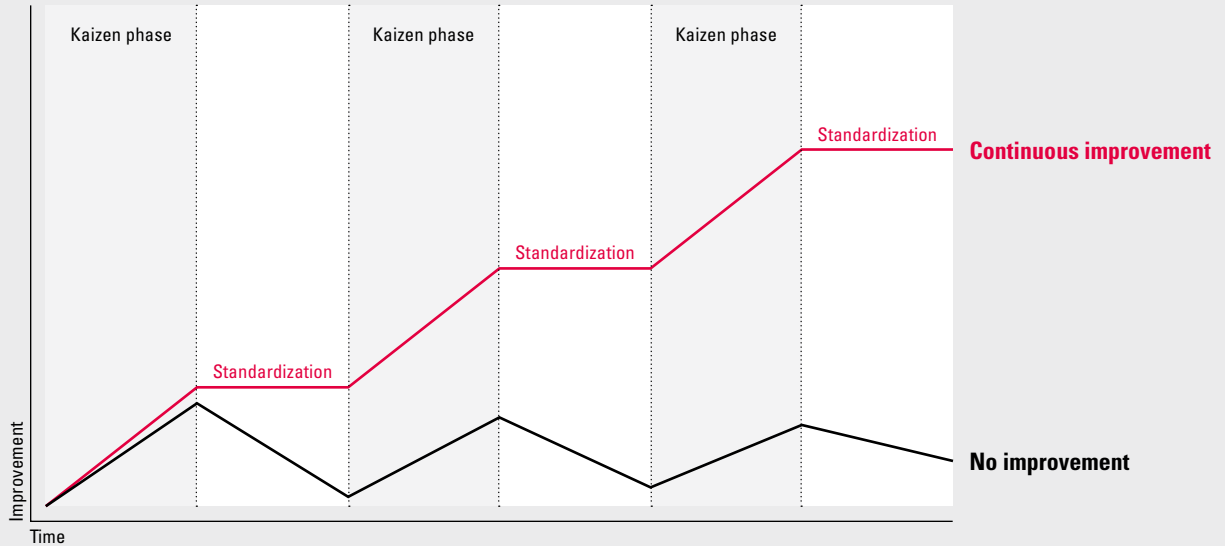
The VP Global Operations is responsible for identifying synergies within Leica Microsystems arising from its global production facilities and putting them to work to benefit the company as a whole. The job also involves developing and refining processes that affect multiple locations and business units.

The DBSL – whose functions also currently fall within my responsibilities – supports the VP Global Operations and all other company employees in that regard. He is a close advisor to the Management Board and applies his knowledge of the various Danaher tools to introducing and improving processes and to solving problems.

Have physics and optics always played a role in your personal development?
Do you have a general affinity for technology? What fascinates you about our industry?

Technology has always been very important to me. But my personal background is in the aerospace industry – thus my affinity for physics. I first came into contact with optics when I joined Leica Microsystems.

Kaizen and standardization



Kaizen is a management concept that can be loosely translated as 'change for the better'. It does not focus on processes, but on people and their potential for solving problems. Kaizen is an ongoing, never-ending sequence of small optimization steps covering everything from the initial idea to manufacturing, marketing and customer relationships, and it involves everyone – the workforce, executives and senior management. Kaizen lets employees recognize their shortcomings and gives them the opportunity to address and correct them without fear of negatively impacting their reputations or careers.

Continuous Improvement is not only central to the Leica Microsystems identity, it's presumably also a core value of your own work. The Japanese refer to it as kaizen. Do you practice kaizen?

If you mean my constant efforts to do things better than ever before, yes. Recognizing errors and thinking about how they came about in order to avoid them in the future is a prerequisite for such progress. Mistakes are a learning opportunity. It's essential to look in the mirror, admit to mistakes and see the scope for improvement. That's my personal philosophy, and I'm pleased to say it's served me well.

“Mistakes are a learning opportunity.”

'Kai' means change, 'zen' translates as 'for the better'. Striving for continuous improvement surely isn't limited to manufacturing processes. Do you see any other areas in the company where it would be appropriate?

Areas that involve interfaces – especially those in which processes are handed over to other persons or departments – are inevitable sources of errors. That's generally due to inadequate or nonexistent process definitions. Each individual may do his or her work well, but that's no guarantee that the final result will meet expectations.

“It’s essential that we work toward a corporate culture in which mistakes are not swept under the rug, but are openly discussed in the group.”

Continuous Improvement is based on the premise that there will always be scope for optimization. Doesn't that also mean that the corporate culture as a whole must allow individuals to admit to their weaknesses or serious problems without fear of reproach? Do we still need to work on that?

As I said earlier, mistakes are a learning opportunity! By recognizing errors, we automatically become aware of shortcomings and issues related to processes. It's essential that we work toward a corporate culture in which mistakes are not swept under the rug, but are openly discussed in the group with the goal of bulletproofing our processes and ensuring that we never make the same mistake twice.

We also must never lose sight of the fact that nobody makes mistakes deliberately, but that they only occur because the description of the process itself is inadequate or increases the likelihood of errors. As a rule, they are not the fault of the employee. (pauses, reflecting) Many of us still have to work on approaching such issues openly, without pointing the finger at individuals.



A steady stream of small steps and enhancements are very important for continuous improvement, so it's safe to assume that speed is of the essence when it comes to practical implementation. Just how fast are you with your improvements?

Very fast indeed! The suggestions we receive come right out of our day-to-day work and are not linked to projects or cumbersome corporate suggestion programs. So they're generally implemented within a few days – and by the actual colleagues who discovered the errors, shortcomings or potential for improvement. That way we can ensure that numerous minor improvements are incorporated in our products virtually on a daily basis – it's essentially an ongoing evolutionary process.

Over one hundred years ago, the stated objective of Ernst Leitz was to be active 'with the user, for the user'. In your opinion, what role does Continuous Improvement play in living up to that claim?

Satisfying our customers is the ultimate goal. It's important that we discover our users' unarticulated needs and address them with our products and services – after all, everyone is already aware of the needs that have been openly voiced!



*“It’s important that we discover
our users’ unarticulated needs.”*

Continuous Improvement is an important weapon in our competition with the other players in the industry. In your opinion, where do we stand in a worldwide comparison? Do we need to get better? And if so, where?

(smiles mischievously) We have the edge on our global competitors in a number of areas, but I'd rather not go into detail on that. Naturally, the competition isn't sitting on its hands, so maintaining and consolidating our lead is crucial. There's always the great danger that a competitor that we've previously ignored or not taken seriously could cut into our market share. We should never underestimate those small but energetic, innovative companies!

“We have the edge in a number of areas.”



Coming back to you personally, what are your next projects?
What are your goals and where do you see a need for action?
Where is your journey going?

As before, I am going to work tirelessly on continuous improvement throughout our company. And to that end, the journey is the destination. We know that a company can never be perfect, but we will never cease working toward that higher goal.

You seem to invest all of your energy into the worldwide success of the company. Do you still have time for a personal life? What do you do in your free time? How do you unwind?

I really don't have much time for my personal life, so I devote all of my leisure time to my family and try to spend as much of it as possible with my wife, children and close friends. I'm very lucky to have a family that understands the challenges I face in my career and that sticks together and supports me. Not only do they give me the strength that I need to live up to my many responsibilities in the company, they also ensure that I never forget what life is all about – people.