Episode Book

EPISODE #5690

Kaizen and the Cult of Productivity

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SYNOPSIS

Productivity tops the priority list for roughly two-thirds of Brits, Americans, and Australians — ahead of health, money, and happiness. But the standard fix of "rest more, work less" misses the real problem: we've lost the ability to notice effort that doesn't immediately pay off. This episode digs into negative lumping, the progress principle, and why Kaizen only works if you actually internalize it. Plus, the surprising history of continuous improvement — an American invention that Japan refined and sent back.

TRANSCRIPT



Corn

Productivity is the most popular life priority on Earth. Not health, not money, not happiness. In a survey of about a million people, roughly two thirds of Brits, two thirds of Americans, and nearly six in ten Australians put productivity at the top. Ahead of everything.



Herman

Which is a remarkable thing to admit out loud when you say it that way.



Corn

And that's before you get to the fact that we made this up recently. Factories were where productivity used to live. It was a property of a system, something an engineer measured on a floor. Then the work moved into offices, and somewhere along the line the whole thing got reassigned to the individual. Now you're supposed to wake up every morning and personally reinvent the assembly line.



Herman

And the standard advice for fixing that is usually some version of work less, rest more, and be more mindful about it. Which I think gets it backwards. The problem isn't the volume of effort. It's that we've lost the ability to notice effort that doesn't immediately pay off.



Corn

Daniel's written in about exactly that. He's been sitting with Kaizen, which we've talked about before, and he's pushing past the version that gets sold as a business method. His framing is that the West has a cult of productivity, the feeling that we have to maximise our daily output to justify our existence, and that Kaizen is a real answer to it, but only if we actually internalise it rather than nodding along with it.



Herman

Internalise is doing the work in that sentence.



Corn

He goes further. He says sustainable effort is the only kind that builds anything lasting, and that effort you can't sustain indefinitely can only build something short lived. Then he names the psychological snag, which is that most of us are deeply uncomfortable with incremental change. His words: we feel that change that doesn't immediately shift the needle on some project or some major endeavour is too modest to matter. So a small step forward gets ignored, because it hasn't cleared whatever bar we're holding in our heads.



Herman

And then the actual ask, which is the interesting part.



Corn

The actual ask is not a definition. He says he'd like our meditations on how we can do this. How do you attune yourself day to day to the value of the modest step.



Herman

Right, so this is not "explain Kaizen." This is "how do you actually live it," which is a much harder question, because it's not a knowledge problem. Every single person listening already agrees with the thesis. The failure happens at four in the afternoon when you've done a small good thing and it feels like nothing.



Corn

Say more about that gap, because I think that's the whole episode.



Herman

The gap is between agreeing with a principle and having your nervous system respond to it. Kaizen's claim is unremarkable on paper. Kai and zen, change and good, better every day, with everyone, everywhere. Masaaki Imai's book in 1986 is how it reached the West, and the Lean Enterprise Institute's definition is just making small incremental improvements in processes that compound over time. Toyota's own framing is that all employees do daily incremental kaizen, with the goal of eliminating waste and shortening lead times. None of that is controversial. The question is why knowing it changes nothing.



Corn

Because the feeling of mattering doesn't come from the size of the step.



Herman

And there's a name for the failure mode. Ed O'Brien at Northwestern ran fourteen experiments on this, over ten thousand participants, twenty thousand choices, twenty five different issues. The finding was what he called negative lumping. When your improvement effort falls short of a categorical threshold, observers collapse everything below that line into the same bucket. All the same. Even when one entity objectively outperformed another by a fixed margin.



Corn

Give me the number, because I want the number.



Herman

Eighty five percent of participants correctly picked the superior entity when there was no threshold. Introduce a categorical bar that framed both options as failures, and that drops to fifty five percent. A thirty point collapse in people's ability to see a real difference, purely because a threshold got mentioned.



Corn

So the bar isn't just unhelpful. It actively blinds you.



Herman

It makes you worse at perceiving reality. And O'Brien's framing of the stakes is brutal. People may dismiss a mere forty percent reduction or a mere four reforms as inconsequential, and so settle for no changes instead. Not smaller changes. No changes.



Corn

Hold on, I want to sit on that for a second. The blinding is not one way. You said absolute failures get lumped, absolute successes don't.



Herman

That's the asymmetry he found, and I think it's the sharpest thing in the paper. People lumped together absolute failures but not absolute successes. A unique blindness to gradations of badness. Which is the opposite of what you'd predict if humans were just optimists. We're not optimists. We're threshold machines. Once you're below the line, everything below the line looks identical.



Corn

So the person who loses four kilos on the way to twenty sees zero progress, and the person who gains four kilos on the way to a problem also sees zero progress, and neither of them can tell you what's actually happening.



Herman

Which is a hell of a thing to build a self-improvement culture on top of.



Corn

Here's the part I keep turning over. The cult of productivity and the anxiety about small steps might be the same bug seen from two directions.



Herman

Say that again, slowly.



Corn

Threshold thinking. The cult says output must be maximised and justified daily, which is a threshold that resets every morning at midnight. The anxiety says a step doesn't count unless it moves the needle, which is a threshold that you never actually define. Same move. You set a line, you stand below it, and everything you did evaporates. The



Corn (continued)

productivity cult is just negative lumping applied to your entire life.



Herman

That lands. And it explains something the standard advice doesn't, which is why "just rest more" doesn't fix it. Byung-Chul Han's whole argument in The Burnout Society is that we're not in a disciplinary society anymore, where some boss stands over you with a rule. We're in an achievement society. The subject is an entrepreneur of themselves. The mantra is "yes, I can." And his key move is that exploitation becomes self-exploitation. The achievement subject exploits itself, and is at once perpetrator and victim.



Corn

So "just stop working so hard" fails because there's nobody to stop.



Herman

Nobody to rebel against. The oppressor is the same person as the oppressed, which means the fix has to be internal, which is precisely what Daniel is pointing at when he says Kaizen only works to the extent we can internalise it.



Corn

That's a sharper read of his prompt than I had on the first pass. Internalising isn't a nice extra. It's the only place the change can happen, because there's no external structure to change.



Herman

Han's line is that prohibitions and commandments have been replaced by projects, initiatives, and motivation. Which sounds like liberation until you notice that a project doesn't end. There's no whistle. The factory floor at least had a shift change.



Corn

The mountain has no summit.



Herman

Where's that from?



Corn

Something I read. If you determine your self-worth by how much you get done, you will be forever worthless, because there will always be more you could have done. I've been chewing on it for a week.



Herman

It's structurally identical to the threshold problem. The threshold moves, so arriving is impossible.



Corn

So what actually moves a person, if not the size of the step and not the lecture about sustainability?



Herman

There's a diary study worth knowing about. Teresa Amabile and Steven Kramer collected around twelve thousand daily diary entries from two hundred and thirty eight knowledge workers across twenty six teams. And the headline finding is that of everything that can boost emotion and motivation during a workday, the single most important is making progress in meaningful work. They called it the progress principle.



Corn

Give me the shape of the data, not the slogan.



Herman

Progress showed up on seventy six percent of people's best mood days. Setbacks on thirteen. Flip it to the worst mood days, and setbacks appear on sixty seven percent, progress on twenty five. So progress predicts good days, setbacks predict bad ones, and neither is about scale.



Corn

The size of the progress doesn't enter into it.



Herman

That's the finding that matters for Daniel's question. Roughly twenty eight percent of incidents that had a minor impact on the project had a major impact on how people felt about it. A minor thing, a major emotional effect. One programmer's diary entry in the study: figured out why something wasn't working correctly, felt relieved and happy, called it a minor milestone.



Corn

A bug fix. So the thing that lifted that person's day was invisible on any dashboard measuring project throughput. It would not have moved the needle. It moved the person.



Herman

And there's a dark corollary in the same data, which is that negative events carry more weight than positive ones. Small setbacks hurt more than small wins help. So if you leave this to chance, the asymmetry runs against you. The default isn't neutral. It drifts down.



Corn

Which is an argument for deliberately marking the small progress, not because it's cute, but because the system is weighted against noticing it.



Herman

That's the practical core of the whole thing, I think. You're not trying to feel good about small steps because positivity is nice. You're compensating for a documented perceptual bias and a documented emotional asymmetry.



Corn

And the managers, in that same study?



Herman

Six hundred and sixty nine of them were surveyed, and ninety five percent failed to rank supporting progress as the top motivator. Most ranked it dead last. So the thing with the largest documented effect on motivation is also the thing almost nobody whose job it is to motivate people thinks matters.



Corn

That's not an oversight, that's a culture.



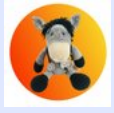
Herman

It's a culture that's been measured. There was a piece in Fortune at the end of last year calling it the cult of productivity and describing the modern version as productivity theater. Motion without momentum, busyness without value.



Corn

That's a good phrase and I hate it.



Herman

It goes on to note that knowledge workers switch tasks roughly every three minutes, and it takes about half an hour to regain focus. So the theater is not even efficient theater. There's a decent estimate floating around that a quarter of the workweek is wasted. And then there's the other end of it. A 2026 essay on hustle culture arguing that what it now produces isn't even burnout, it's identity foreclosure, pointing at a figure that half of Gen Z



Herman (continued)

workers left a job in the previous year.



Corn

Half.



Herman

Half.



Corn

That's a figure where you can't tell any more whether it's a labor market story or a psychological one. Either way, something is unbinding.



Herman

The labor market part is real and I don't want to pretend it's all existential. But the essay's point is that when your identity is fused to output, leaving isn't just a career move, it's an amputation. And people still do it, at scale. Which suggests the fusion isn't holding.



Corn

Here's where I want to push on the framing, because the standard narrative is Eastern wisdom versus Western hustle, and the actual history muddies it.



Herman

It muddies it a lot. Continuous improvement programs were conceived, developed, and brought to maturity in the United States. Then exported to Japan after the Second World War, where they took root and got refined into what we now call Kaizen. MIT Sloan Management Review's title for the piece is literally "America's Most Successful Export to Japan."



Corn

So the thing we're importing back as ancient Eastern patience is our own factory management returning after a round trip.



Herman

Which doesn't diminish it. Toyota did the hard work of turning a set of statistical process ideas into a living culture. The Toyota Production System rests on two pillars, jidoka and just in time, and the daily kaizen part is that every employee is expected to make small improvements continuously, not wait for a quarterly initiative.



Corn

That's the transferable thing. Not the origin story, the expectation. Everybody, every day, small.



Herman

And it's worth noticing what Kaizen asks you to do at the level of a single sentence. The PMC practical guide describes it as questioning the phrase "that is just how we do things." Trying to eliminate silos, egos, and waste through micro changes. And the Springer reference makes the point that Kaizen isn't a method, because all the existing techniques of analysis and creativity stay in use. It's a stance, not a toolkit.



Corn

A stance is harder to adopt than a toolkit. Nobody can hand you a stance.



Herman

That's why the self-help version of this is thin. And this is a real gap I want to flag, because I went looking. There isn't a canonical Kaizen for personal life text. The primary sources are almost entirely about manufacturing and business process. Toyota, Lean, quality management. The leap from the factory floor to your Tuesday morning is largely an interpretive move made by Western writers, not something the underlying literature establishes.



Corn

So the honest position is that we're applying a manufacturing philosophy by analogy, and the analogy is doing work the sources don't endorse.



Herman

I think that's right, and it's fine, as long as we say so. The mechanism transfers well enough. The daily expectation, the small step, the refusal to wait for the big intervention. What doesn't transfer cleanly is the measuring. A factory has a line and a rate. Your life doesn't.



Corn

Which is exactly where the threshold problem bites. The factory's thresholds are real and externally set. Yours are invented, usually at three in the morning, and usually unreachable.



Herman

There's a newer piece of research that speaks to that directly. Yilin Liu and Fan Yang, published in Psychological Science a week and a half ago. Moved by the Lightest Touch of Meaning. They gave people a task where the result could either be preserved or destroyed, shredding a piece of artwork versus saving it, and even that minimal amount of significance measurably boosted motivation. In children and in adults.



Corn

Minimal as in close to nothing.



Herman

Minimal as in the only thing that changed was whether the output survived. And Fan Yang's line about it is that significance is almost like air. We really need it, and in a lot of situations we don't notice because it's already there. But it has to be something people personally create for them to really care about it. It can't be handed to them.



Corn

So the significance has to be self-generated. Which loops back to internalisation again. Daniel keeps being right.



Herman

The practical move they suggest is a question swap. Instead of asking how can I make this job more enjoyable, ask where does my work go, or what remains here because I did it, or who or what does it affect. Which is a way of building your own significance signal instead of waiting for one to arrive from outside.



Corn

That's the first actionable thing we've said, and I want to test it, because I think it has a trap in it.



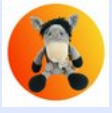
Herman

Go on.



Corn

If you build your own significance signal, you can also build your own threshold, and then you're back to negative lumping with extra steps. The question swap only works if the answer is descriptive rather than a bar you set.



Herman

I hadn't thought of it that way but I think you're right. What remains because I did it is an observation. It's not a target. The moment you turn it into "I must be able to name what remains by Friday," you've rebuilt the thing you're trying to escape.



Corn

The cult is portable. That's what makes it a cult.



Herman

There's a related trap that I think is worth naming, which is the rest-as-tool problem. A lot of the current advice is that you should rest because rest makes you more productive. Which sounds like a correction and is actually the same disease. It frames relaxation as an input to output. The break is now a component of the machine.



Corn

So "quiet thriving" and "quiet quitting" and "quiet cracking," which is the Fortune framing, they're all the same vocabulary. Every fix gets expressed as a productivity strategy.



Herman

Quiet thriving, in that piece, is defined as making small intentional shifts that give work back some meaning. It's grounded in Amy Wrzesniewski and Jane Dutton's job crafting research, and in self-determination theory, autonomy, competence, connection. Which is solid. But notice that even the remedy is pitched as a way to give work meaning. Not as a way to have a life that contains work.



Corn

And this is where I want to bring in the tree, because I think there's a much older answer sitting in a different tradition entirely.



Herman

The useless tree.



Corn

Zhuangzi's gnarled tree survives precisely because it's useless to the carpenter. It gets left alone. It grows old. And the point isn't that uselessness is a strategy for longevity, it's that the category of useful was never the right frame. The carpenter's judgment was the problem, not the tree's shape.



Herman

Which cuts against half the productivity literature. But I want to be careful, because I don't think that's an argument for doing nothing. It's an argument against letting someone else's category do your valuing for you.



Corn

Agreed. Nothing in the tree parable says don't improve the thing you care about. It says don't accept the carpenter's question as the only question.



Herman

There's an obvious counterexample I should put on the table, because it's real and it complicates the whole thesis. There are people who track their own work meticulously and report that the harder and longer they work, the more they get done, without bound and without a burnout rebound. Just shockingly linear.



Corn

I've read those threads. It's always someone with a spreadsheet.



Herman

And I don't want to dismiss it, because I don't think it's dishonest. I think it's rare. Most people are not built for the linear version, and more importantly, most people's work is not the kind where more hours produce proportionally more output. If you're one of the small number whose work scales with hours, the sustainability argument is weaker for you specifically.



Corn

But the cult argument isn't weakened at all, because the cult doesn't ask whether your work scales with hours. It just assumes everyone's does, and treats the ones who can't sustain it as morally deficient.



Herman

Which is the Protestant layer. Hard work earns heaven, laziness is sin, and that frame survives long after the theology stopped. There's a nice line in one of the essays about it, that laziness today is seen as ethically wrong. Not inefficient. Wrong.



Corn

A vice. And once it's a vice, the fix has to be moral discipline, which is exactly the wrong tool for a perceptual bias.



Herman

You can't discipline your way out of negative lumping. You can only design around it.



Corn

All right, so let's actually do the thing Daniel asked for. He didn't ask for a definition and he didn't ask for the research. He asked for meditations on how to attune yourself, day to day, to the modest step. I have a few, and I want to hear yours, and I want us to stay concrete.



Herman

Start with yours.



Corn

First one, and it's the least glamorous. Measure differently. If the only instrument you have is whether the needle moved, you've built a system that cannot perceive your actual life. So keep one ledger of things that got better, and make the entries small enough that you can't cheat. " Fixed the thing that made the project annoying. That's an entry.



Herman

And the point isn't the record, it's that the act of writing forces the perception.



Corn

Right. The entry is a perception aid, not a scoreboard. The moment you start counting entries per day and feeling bad about the count, you've turned it into a threshold and the instrument is broken again.



Herman

Which is the recurring shape of all of this. Every tool you build can be reabsorbed by the cult if you let it become a target.



Corn

Second one. Lower the definition of done. Not forever, just for the current step. Most people set done at the level of the project, which means done is by construction never available. And a person who never experiences completion stops believing completion exists, and then effort starts to feel meaningless independent of the actual work.



Herman

That connects to something in the progress data. The programmer who felt relieved and happy called it a minor milestone. He had a scale with minor milestones on it. The relief wasn't from the fix, it was from being able to classify the fix as a completion.



Corn

That's a better phrasing than mine. Let me steal it without credit.



Herman

Freely.



Corn

Third, and this is the one I actually practice. Stop treating attention like a resource you're spending and start treating it like a place you're standing. If I'm in a task, I'm in the task, and the fact that I'm still there after forty minutes without a visible result is not a failure, it's a description. Productivity framing wants every minute to have a witness. I'd rather a



Corn (continued)

few unwitnessed minutes.



Herman

That's the sloth talking.



Corn

It's always the sloth talking. The question is whether the sloth is wrong.



Herman

He isn't, on this. All right, mine. The archery one, and I'll keep it short because I've used it before. When I shoot, most of what determines the result is setup, and setup is boring and invisible and the part nobody photographs. Consistency comes from the boring part. So my first meditation is that the thing that looks like a waste of a session, checking the equipment, is actually where the accuracy comes from, and you cannot tell from the scoreboard which part of your practice produced the shot.



Corn

So the modest step and the invisible step are the same step, seen by different people.



Herman

That's it. Second contribution, and this one is more of a discipline than a meditation. Separate the doing from the reviewing, and put a lot of time between them. If you evaluate a step while you're still inside it, you're doing threshold thinking in real time, because you have no distance and no context. Review weekly, at most. Not because weekly is magic, but because daily review turns every day into a verdict, and a verdict a day is how the cult gets fed.



Corn

A verdict a day. That's the thing to put on the wall.



Herman

Third, and it's the direct counter to the emotional asymmetry. Notice that setbacks are weighted heavier than gains, so schedule one deliberate act of noticing per day, and make it structural rather than enthusiastic. Not "I'll try to appreciate my progress." At the end of the day, name one thing that exists now that didn't exist this morning. That's it. One line. And do it badly if you have to.



Corn

Why badly?



Herman

Because the perfectionism is the failure pattern. The moment the noticing ritual has to be profound, it joins the achievement economy. Trivial is fine. The bug is fixed. The paragraph exists. The email got sent. Done badly, every day, beats done well, occasionally.



Corn

Here's the one I think is hardest, and it's the one I'd actually put to Daniel directly, because I think he's already living it without calling it this.



Herman

Go on.



Corn

Set an upper bound, not a lower bound. Almost everything in productivity culture is a floor. Do at least this many, at least this long, at least this much. Floors are the cult's native instrument. A ceiling is the opposite move. I will not improve this past a certain point today. I will stop the thing at a specific hour, not when it's finished, because it's never finished.



Herman

And a ceiling is the only thing that makes sustainability real rather than aspirational.



Corn

Sustainability isn't a feeling. It's a boundary you actually hold when it's inconvenient.



Herman

I think that's the best thing said so far. And it's the one that would survive contact with a Wednesday.



Corn

There's a fourth thing I have, and it's more of an observation than a practice. Most people I know are already doing the modest step. They just don't count it because it wasn't on the list. The Kaizen move isn't to add work. It's to acknowledge work that already happened under a different name.



Herman

Which is the oldest productivity trick there is, reframed. You don't need more output. You need better accounting.



Corn

Better accounting, lower thresholds, and a ceiling. That's the whole meditation and I'm slightly annoyed it fits in one sentence.



Herman

You could stretch it.



Corn

I could. I won't.



Herman

One more from me, and it's the one I keep coming back to. The research on this is all about perception, not about effort. Nobody in any of those studies was told to work harder. The intervention was always about whether the work was seen. Which means the whole game is legibility. Make your progress visible to yourself, and the motivation follows on its own, because it was never a supply problem.