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MASTERING THE GEMBA WALK

What's the center stage of lean management?

The “gemba” is, of course. That’s the “real place” where work is happening, where value is being created. That’s the focal point of improvement, of lean thinking and action. The “gemba walk,” then, just as it sounds, is a walk leaders and teams take to see what is going on in the gemba. Seems simple enough: walk around the shop, the plant, the office, or the hospital floor; check up on what people are doing; take a few notes about what you’ll have to change; make your presence felt; and perhaps deliver a few pats on the back, critiques, and pointers as you move on through.

Not quite. There’s actually much more to the art of the gemba walk. As Taiichi Ohno said, referring to the concept of MBWA (managing by wandering around) popularized by Tom Peters in the early 1980s, “Talking about it is easy—but it is actually difficult to ‘wander’ effectively around the workplace. A manager wandering aimlessly can only bring about more negative results than positive ones. This disturbs people in the workplace and interferes with the work flow.”¹

Rather than start off on the wrong foot then, take a few minutes to review the principles behind the gemba walk, understand its connection with leader standard work, and learn some tips to help you launch an effective gemba walk practice for yourself and your organization.

GEMBA WALK BENEFITS AND PURPOSE

The gemba walk is a core practice for developing lean thinking throughout an organization.

It's a way to deepen one's understanding of processes and people, identify opportunities for improvement, and teach or reinforce lean thinking and practices.

When a leader makes regular gemba walks, he or she...

1. Gets out of the office and away from abstract data and learns by directly observing the workplace, people, and processes.
2. Demonstrates a disciplined and committed approach to lean and continuous improvement, as well as personal ownership of the changes.
3. Reinforces a focus on "process" and on the importance of standard work.
4. Develops the ability to teach Socratically, based on questioning, which engages people, helps them to learn, and shows respect for their motivation.
5. Supports the behavioral changes that result in a lean culture—one that can sustain improvement over time.

Although gemba walks can have different objectives, the bottom line is that they must be purposeful. They are not audits per se, but they do provide an unmatched opportunity to learn about process status and activities first-hand and detect abnormalities.

One might, for example, take a gemba walk to get a macro view of an overall value stream and identify opportunities for improvement. That type of gemba walk usually occurs in connection with value stream mapping.

Routine gemba walks can be instrumental in setting up managers to teach and reinforce lean thinking and practices.

Gemba walks can also help executives and managers learn about lean, how to support it, and what the failure modes are. And routine gemba walks can be instrumental in setting up managers to teach and reinforce lean thinking and practices. These management gemba walks are opportunities to set and confirm expectations and to encourage process standardization and adherence, with teaching and learning focused on a theme. All of these modes of use help sustain lean and support a culture of continuous improvement.

GEMBA WALKS CAN INVOLVE ALL LEVELS.

Gemba walks should be conducted consistently to be effective.

Anyone involved on an improvement team might participate in a gemba walk aimed at understanding a process or value stream. When it comes to enhancing sustainment of lean, though, it is primarily managers and leaders who conduct gemba walks.

Management gemba walks can involve all managerial levels of an organization, from team leaders and supervisors on up through middle managers and top leaders. In fact, representatives from multiple managerial levels can participate together in team gemba walks, particularly in the early stages of lean transformation when people are learning how to use them best as a regular discipline.

And “regular” is an operative word here. Gemba walks should be conducted consistently to be effective. The frequency depends on who in the organization is conducting the gemba walk, where it is being conducted, and how it connects with the leader’s standard work (more on that in the next section).

A typical schedule might look something like this:

- VP of Operations—quarterly
- Plant manager—monthly
- Director of manufacturing—weekly
- Team leader—daily

GEMBA WALKS ARE A VITAL PART OF LEADER STANDARD WORK.

A focus on standards is the heart of the gemba walk.

For lean initiatives to succeed and be sustained, making technical changes in operational processes is not enough. Leaders need to change their behaviors and actions as well.

They are the ones who can break down or negotiate barriers to process flow across organizational siloes. And it’s up to leadership to maintain the integrity of efforts by supporting new behaviors and practices around the organization and holding people (including themselves) accountable.

Continuous reinforcement is needed to change ingrained, habitual behaviors and customs. That kind of change doesn’t happen overnight. A new system of management needs to take hold. This “lean management system” encompasses three main elements: visual controls, standard accountability processes, and leader standard work, all revolving around the hub of a process focus.²

The “leader standard work” element typically refers to work aimed at ensuring the integrity of standard processes in a leader’s areas of responsibility. Gemba walks play a vital role in leader standard work at every level, and integrally support the other elements of a lean management system. We can once again refer to Taiichi Ohno to help connect the dots between gemba walks, visual management, and accountability for standard work:³

- For the manager wandering around the workplace, signs, charts, data, and standards that accurately measure current workplace conditions are indispensable. Although it is important to converse with the people working in the workplace, visual indicators are more desirable.
- [T]he objective of MBWA is to establish our own checkpoints. If...standards are posted around the production plant, MBWA effectiveness will increase dramatically. The group, applying such standards from top to bottom, will become extremely responsive and develop a common awareness towards work.

A focus on standards is the heart of the gemba walk. It is important to talk about the work with the people performing it, but even more important to have established checkpoints or accountability boards, to develop a common awareness by getting everyone to see the same thing, and to maintain a process focus.

That’s what drives accountability and reinforces lean thinking.

THE EXECUTIVE GEMBA WALK

It is important to determine a personally meaningful role for these top leaders.

Gemba walks can also play a key part in engaging and sustaining the active interest and support of senior leaders and sponsors. Lack of top-level support for lean is a common problem, especially when improvement initiatives are not top-driven or when leadership changes. It's also a problem that results in failed initiatives.

One misconception that can cause a disconnect with senior leaders, as David Mann discussed with us, is the expectation that they will become experts in all the technical aspects of lean.⁴ Everyone should grasp lean principles, but in most organizations you'll have no chance of getting the chief information officer, say, to work out the elements of a kanban system. Fortunately, that's not necessary; but it is important to determine a personally meaningful role for these top leaders that fits with their managerial responsibilities.

Mann described the development of "executive gemba walks" at Steelcase as a successful response to the problem. When executives lost interest in persisting with gemba walks that focused on the technical details of manufacturing operations, the walks were restructured. The themes were changed to be more relevant to these execs, centering on one or two diagnostic questions based on lean management standards.

These standards cover key managerial processes such as leader standard work, visual process controls, and standard accountability processes.

Short debriefing sessions provide a "90-second teachable moment."

This structure set up successful gemba walks in a number of ways, both for the enhancement of a lean culture and for development of lean expertise among executives. It gave senior leaders a specific task for which they were prepared, making them confident, active during the walk, and comfortable in their role. During the time spent walking to the gemba site, a lean staff member facilitating the walk would brief the executive on lean application in that area.

A short time was set aside after each gemba walk for a debriefing, during which the exec could compare notes with the lean facilitator. This short session provided what Mann calls a "90-second teachable moment." Most senior executives are quick studies, achievement-oriented, and competitive. That means they often will be one-trial learners and by the next gemba walk will have closed any gaps and learned to see what the lean facilitator sees.

Checking on the health of the lean management system at the places where it is being applied is an important and meaningful gemba walk theme. It provides a way to actively support the management system, which in turn supports the production system. It enables leaders to see how the management structure below them is working and identify managers the executive might need to teach or coach. It's also an opportunity to reinforce expectations and to ensure the organization is carrying out the designated strategies and tactical activities.

To reach a sustainable practice, Mann counsels, "Executives should expect to spend 45 to 60 minutes every week or two gemba walking with a lean teacher, or sensei, for six months to a year. Thereafter, they should regularly gemba walk on their own."⁵

GEMBA WALK TIPS AND HOW-TO'S

With up-front planning and discipline, you will find the process can quickly take hold and become “what leaders do.”

For Taiichi Ohno, being in the gemba (the actual workplace), was a core principle that drove skill development and connected leaders to the real work and the real state of affairs. Mastering the art of the gemba walk takes practice, but the rewards are well worth the effort. With up-front planning and discipline, you will find the process can quickly take hold and become “what leaders do” rather than a superfluous and burdensome extra task.

Here are ten how-to tips for setting up a successful leader gemba walk practice— one that's fully integrated with your management, operational, and improvement systems.

1. Don't walk into the workplace “looking for something.” You will accomplish nothing other than confusing everyone.
2. Do have planned, clear teaching and lean management themes, determined by managers and outlined for several months in advance.
3. Keep themes strategically relevant: examples include visual display effectiveness, 5S, process stability or reliability, how we improve (e.g., quality, downtime), safety, overall business performance, line support, or ergonomics.
4. Maintain focus on the theme during the walk.
5. Ask questions that are clearly and specifically phrased.
6. Allow time for people to develop responses, and listen attentively to learn.
7. Be prepared to answer questions and provide options or alternatives.
8. Follow up on any unanswered questions and other actions agreed to.
9. Watch for abnormalities; remember the walk is designed for learning all around.
10. Be consistent, conduct walks regularly, and share what you learn.

Notes

¹ Ohno, Taiichi, with Setsuo Mito. *Just-In-Time for Today and Tomorrow* (Productivity Press, 1988), p. 81. Ohno was the creator of the just-in-time system at Toyota, and the man most credited with the development of lean production and management.

² Mann, David. *Creating a Lean Culture* (Productivity Press, 2005 and 2010).

³ Ohno, op. cit., pp. 81, 97-98.

⁴ Productivity Inc. *Pragmatic Steps for Leading Lean*, 2011

⁵ Mann, David, “The Missing Link: Lean Leadership,” *Frontiers of Health Services Management* (26:1, p. 25).

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