



PERSPECTIVES

WHEN IN DOUBT, TAKE A HIKE:
The Value of Gemba Walks

Our perspectives feature the viewpoints of our subject matter experts on current topics and emerging trends.

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Introduction

To some of you, this article may seem repetitious. However, having walked and talked about dozens of manufacturing floors and operations in the past year alone, I can tell you we're not done delivering this message. And, for those of you who think the Lean method and Gemba Walking only apply to manufacturing environments, I encourage you to reconsider.

In today's fast-paced business world, decision-making can often feel like a guessing game. With dashboards full of data, constant emails, and meetings that never seem to end, leaders can easily lose touch with the heart of their operations: the front line. That's where the power of the Gemba Walk comes in.

The term Gemba (also spelled Genba) comes from Japanese and translates roughly to "the real place." In the context of business—especially lean manufacturing and continuous improvement—it refers to the place where [value is created](#). For a manufacturer, it's the shop floor. For a software company, it might be the development floor or customer support. For a hospital, it's the patient ward. The idea is simple: if you want to understand what's really going on, go to the source.

Why Gemba Walks Matter

Over the years, I have been asked by junior associates of our firm and from those outside of the operational function: How do you 'tour a plant' as an operator? How do you see what you see? How do you know what to look for and determine your findings? My first advice is to impart that the 'tour' is not a break from the work. It is the work. It's when all your senses and powers of observation need to be fully alert. You need

to prepare for tours, research, and understand what processes you might see, and be ready to adapt your questions and topics to what you see....and what you don't. Frankly, to know it's working at the end of the tour, you should be ready for a break. There are publications about learning how to 'see,' but we'll leave those for another article.

In a similar way to tours, a Gemba Walk is more than just a casual stroll. Above all, it is a purposeful visit to observe the work, engage with those doing the work, and understand the work along with its process, challenges, and opportunities. While I've seen very structured Gemba walks, I would caution against too much structure. We want to maintain a dialogue, not check boxes. This dialogue should create an open forum for questions, an opportunity to build trust with leadership and the front line, and encourage a culture of open communication, continuous insight, and [improvement](#). In a recent interview for an interim COO role, I was asked how I drive accountability all the way out to the floor...and Gemba walks are one of the primary methods that I use. In every interim leadership role that I take, I will not be a seat warmer. And it's even more important for permanent leadership to stay connected with the 'work,' in whatever shape, form, or fashion that it takes place. For these reasons, it's best to combine structure with the art form of open dialogue; therein lies the value.

The Value of Gemba Walks for Enhancing Operations

1. See the Process, Not the PowerPoint

Gemba walks allow leaders to witness firsthand how work is being done. Instead of relying

on filtered reports or high-level summaries, they get an unvarnished view of operations. What's working? What's not? Where are the delays? This direct observation reveals nuances and bottlenecks that may never show up in a spreadsheet.

2. Empower Employees

When done respectfully, Gemba walks show employees that leadership cares about their work and values their input. They help build engagement and ownership. Employees often have the best insights on how to improve a process—they just need someone to listen.

3. Spot Waste and Opportunities for Improvement

One of the foundational goals of lean thinking is to eliminate waste. Gemba walks help identify inefficiencies and uncover opportunities. Looking for the common 'wastes' of the Lean method (reviewed below) is the structure. Combining that mindset with leadership's view and the observation and input of front-line workers is where the art gets formed. This is a source of real value creation.

4. Enable Cross-Functional Communication

Even in some of the smallest operations, I've witnessed the 'we' and 'they' of disjointed operations that work in silos with their own 'process.' This is where Gemba walks can help bridge the gaps that work against the company process by identifying and including these individuals to drive team culture.

5. Create a Continuous Improvement Culture

When Gemba walks become a regular habit, they reinforce the mindset that learning and improvement never stop. Never stop learning. They signal that it's okay to question the status quo and that everyone has a role in making things better.

6. A Tool for Accountability

The discipline of Gemba walks helps to establish accountability on multiple levels: 1) with the supervisors that join, 2) indirectly from your presence, and 3) directly through the agenda of the walks themselves. Sometimes, the regular presence of leadership alone helps frontline operations know that everyone is responsible for [performance and improvement](#)... from the front office to the floor.

5 Simple Agenda Items for Gemba Walks

You don't need a complicated checklist or process to get started. Just a curious mind, a willingness to listen, and a simple plan. Do not let a perfect plan keep you from starting....go on that hike! Here are five simple agenda items that can help structure your first few walks:

1. Observe the Flow of Work

Watch how work moves from one step to the next. Are there delays? Backlogs? Workarounds? Don't interrupt the process, just watch. The goal here is to understand how value is being created and where it might be getting stuck.

Prompt question: "Can you walk me through the process from start to finish?"

2. Listen to the People Doing the Work

Ask open-ended questions and genuinely listen. What's frustrating them? What would they change if they could? You're not there to solve everything on the spot—just to learn.

Prompt question: "What's one thing that would make your job easier?"

3. Use Process Improvement Tools to Identify Waste

The Lean method provides a well-structured and thorough list of waste sources, and it is worth understanding each one and how it applies. When adapted to your operation, they become a great “structure” for your Gemba walks that enables communication and the search for improvement opportunities. For reference, those are defects, extra processing, inventory, motion, overproduction, transportation, underutilized talent, and waiting.

Prompt question: “Is there anything here that feels like a waste of your time or energy?”

4. Prioritize Safety and Quality Issues

While many would argue this should be the ‘first’ objective, it is certainly the most critical. Even outside of Gemba walks, when I walk through the plant to a remote office, I’m looking for safety first. Are there any recurring issues that compromise safety or product/service quality? Sometimes these are hidden in plain sight and only become clear when someone takes the time to really look.

Prompt question: “Are there any common issues or problems we should know about?”

5. Empower Employees to Drive Continuous Improvement

Encourage employees to think about how things could be better. This input could be small tweaks or huge innovations. In any case, having this dialogue often leads to positive changes, and drawing out this input creates a sense of ownership and collaboration.

Prompt question: “If you had a magic wand, what would you improve, fix, or change?”

Kickstarting Effective Leadership with Your First Gemba Walks

As we mentioned above, Gemba walks are a balance between art and structure, and it doesn’t require moving mountains. As with your operation, your Gemba walks will also be the subject for continuous improvement...it’s most important to get started. Here’s a way to begin the process:

1. Schedule Regular Gemba Walks

Set aside 30-60 minutes each week for your walk. Put it on your calendar and treat it as non-negotiable. Consistency builds trust and credibility.

2. Narrow Your Focus

Start small. Choose one area of the business—like a specific department or workflow—and focus there for a few weeks. Over time, expand your reach.

3. Bring a Notebook, Not a Laptop

This isn’t a time for emails or multitasking. Bring a notepad, take observations, and jot down follow-up items. Focus on being present.

4. Partner Up

If you’re new to Gemba walks, go with someone who knows the area, maybe a supervisor or team lead. They can help translate what you’re seeing and smooth communication with frontline workers. Remember that supervisors are part of the value stream in Gemba walks. Also, rotate “guests” into your walks, especially those that are removed from the operation (like an A/R clerk, a buyer, or a marketing assistant) who could benefit from understanding the floor...and you’ll be surprised by the ideas.

5. Follow Up to Close the Loop

One of the biggest mistakes leaders make is failing to close the loop. If you hear an idea or concern, acknowledge it and follow up. You don't have to fix everything right away but showing that you're taking input seriously builds trust.

Conclusion

In uncertain times or when faced with a tough decision or when accountability is thin, it's tempting to retreat to data, dashboards, or conference rooms. But the most valuable insights are often found not in the boardroom, but on the floor—where real work happens.

When in doubt, take a hike! Go to the real place. Listen more than you speak. See with your own eyes. You'll be amazed at what you learn, the connections you make, and the improvements that naturally follow.

One final recommendation: don't delay. There is very little stopping you from getting to know the operation now. Adapting a well-known phrase, don't let perfect be the enemy of good enough. You can evolve the process as you learn. You are ready right now...so get to the Gemba now. There's too much to gain.

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