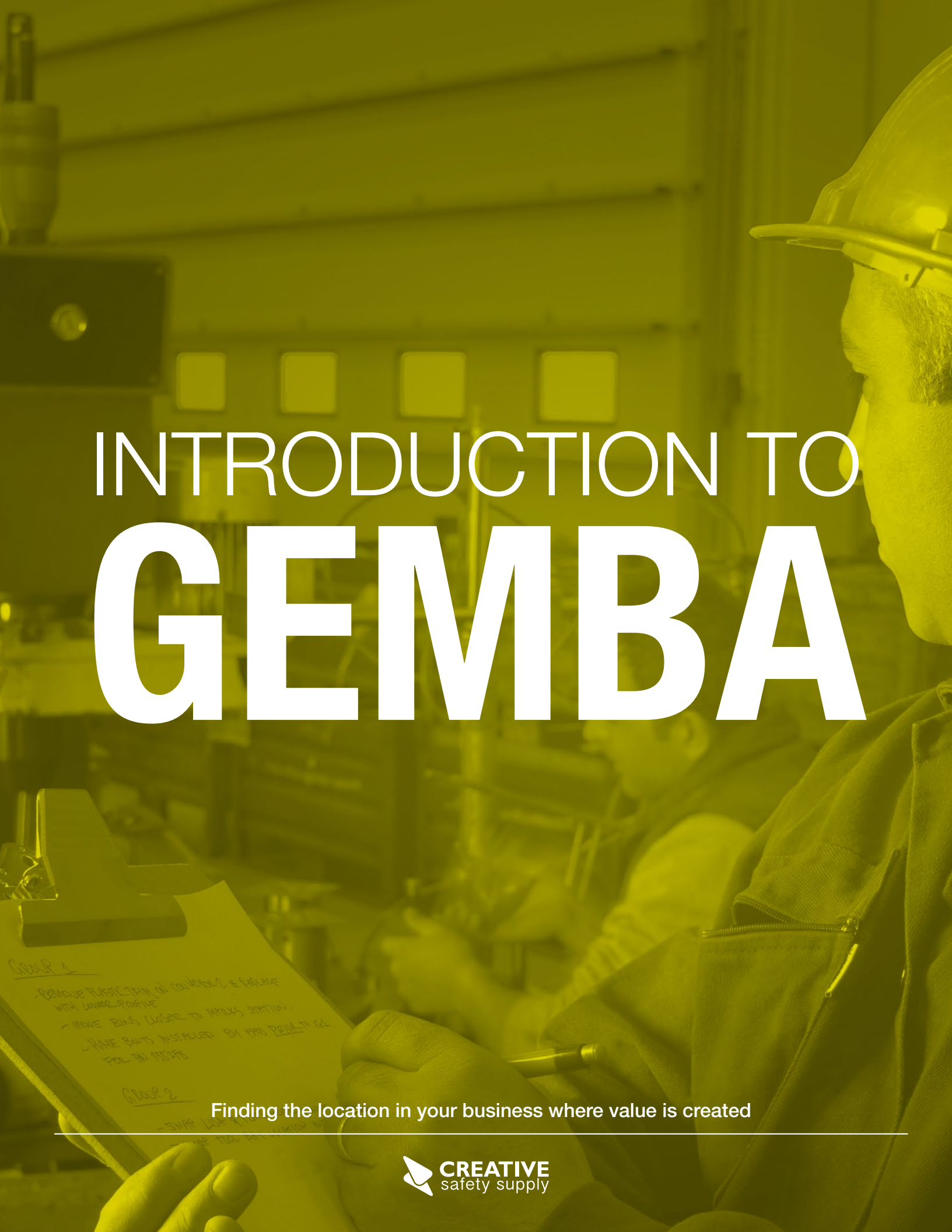

INTRODUCTION TO GEMBA

Finding the location in your business where value is created

CREATIVE safety supply

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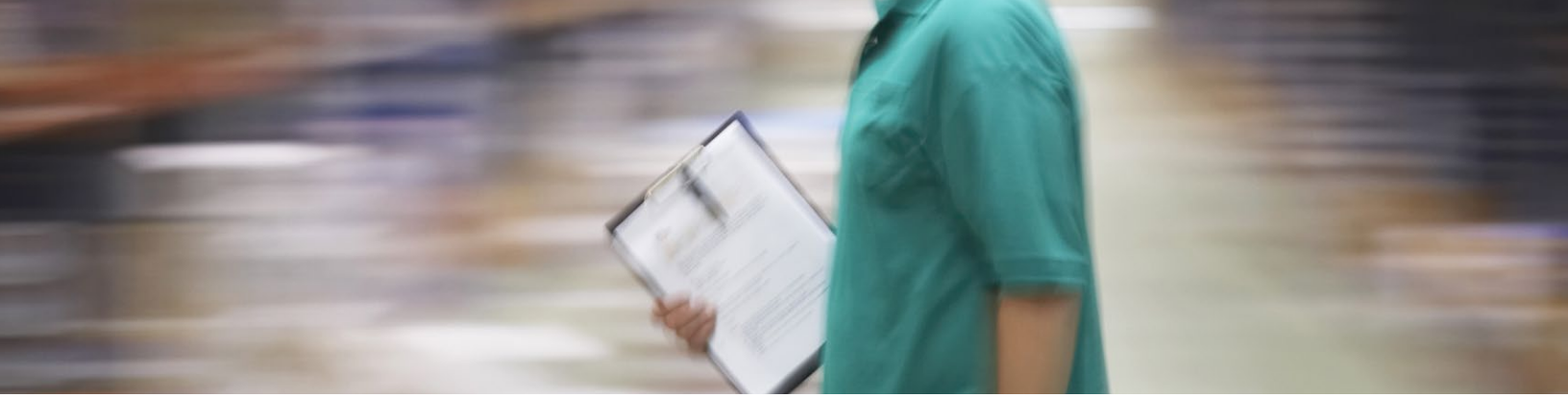


What Is Gemba?

Gemba, a term first used by Toyota, means going to the real place where the action is. In the 1980s, 'In Search of Excellence' author Tom Peters popularized the concept when he talked about management by wandering around (MBWA).

Like MBWA, gemba walks take management to the front lines to see daily happenings. Gemba, however, is more focused.

Find Where Value Is Created

Gemba refers to "the real place," the location where value is created in your business. In an industrial environment, that place is often the manufacturing floor where you create the products you sell to your customers.

By going to that place and observing work processes, managers can gain new data and a fresh perspective.

In lean thinking, a gemba walk allows managers to identify areas of waste that could be eliminated from work processes to improve efficiency. In reality, though, a gemba walk can reduce waste, improve company culture, and even increase safety in the workplace.

Take a Break From Technology

Why? Because managers spend too much time at their desks reading reports, gazing at smartphones, attending back-to-back meetings, and relying on their inner circle to supply them with information.

Think of getting up and walking around as an opportunity for discovery — an eye-opener.

In this guide, we'll examine how to plan for and begin taking successful gemba walks in your workplace so you can better solve your customers' problems and your workplace's issues.

Why Is Gemba Important for Businesses?

Organizations are VERTICAL and often complex, with managers looking up toward the top (the CEO) for direction. Employees turn to management for direction.

Value flows HORIZONTALLY across organizations to customers. A gemba walk helps managers see and reconcile the horizontal with the vertical.

The Gemba Walk

The Objective of a Gemba Walk

In businesses, managers often look to company leaders for direction. The value created by a business, though, exists out on the work floor. By taking gemba walks, managers can get ideas for improvement from the place where value is actually created.

The objective of a gemba walk is not to map out your facility and note every area that needs improvement all at once. It's also not to look for errors and correct them right away.

Rather, the purpose of the gemba walk is to go out and see what's actually happening, begin a dialogue with workers, and then return from the walk with ideas for improvement.

Your goal is also to assess your processes from start to finish, measuring the work you see to determine how successful it is. This can be done over a series of walks rather than all at once, too, allowing you to focus on specific parts of your value-creation process.

The Approach to a Gemba Walk

The secret to gemba walks is the fine line between engagement and snooping. If you're "managing by wandering around" to check up on people and make sure they are really working, you're going to breed discontent. But if you're genuinely interested in what people are working on, they will look forward to seeing you.

Therefore, you should approach your workers with respect and interest in what they do. You should not plan to remedy problems or correct behaviors while you're out on the work floor. Prepare to observe, ask questions, and promote creative thinking among employees.

You should also try to approach your walk without assumptions about what you will find. This can be difficult to do, but assuming you already know what the situation is before you see it can prevent you from observing reality clearly.

Developing New Gemba Skills

Successful observation requires practice. Over time, managers who take gemba walks learn how to look at their business' processes in productive ways. They learn what circumstances indicate problems are present, they learn what questions to ask workers, and they learn to use their observations to implement improvements.

Beginning gemba walk practitioners should remember that observation takes time, effort, and patience. You may not feel comfortable with the process right away, but over time you will gain confidence.

"Farming looks mighty easy when your plow is a pencil and you're 1,000 miles away from a cornfield."

--Dwight Eisenhower

What Gemba Is and What It Is Not

Gemba IS NOT...

Management by walking around (MBWA). MBWA is often too unstructured to be of value. It can be ineffective and hurt morale.

Gemba DOES NOT...

Solve specific problems by walking around pointing out negatives, or approach processes with proconceived notions about their inadequacies

Gemba IS...

- Where the activity is performed
- A great opportunity to strengthen your team culture

Gemba DOES...

Observe with a deep interest and seek to gain understanding while leaving all assumptions and opinions at the office

4 Steps to Realizing Gemba Success:

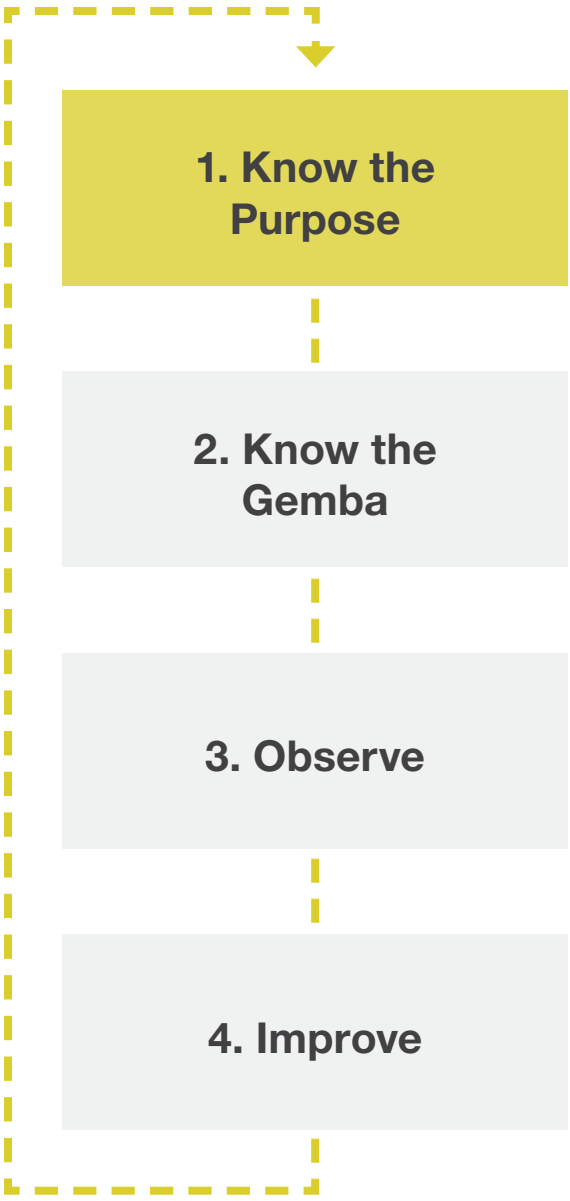
1. Know the Purpose

Before you head out on your gemba walk, you need to plan. Tackling an entire value-creation process at once is overwhelming and often results in vague observations that aren't very useful.

To create a plan, you first need to understand your purpose on both a large and small scale. In the most general sense, what is the purpose of your business? Presumably, your purpose is to help your customer solve a problem in some way. The product you provide solves that problem. Make sure you always keep that purpose in mind. For example, during your walk you might ask yourself how a particular step in a process adds value for a customer.

More specifically, you need to have a purpose for your gemba walk, and it's often useful to have a purpose more specific than "assess the state of my company's processes." Decide what aspect of your operations you want to look at during a given walk and keep in mind what you want to learn. Maybe you want to look at how safe a process is or whether any extra motion exists during a task. Understand that you can't cover everything at once. Do stay open-minded during your walk, though, to whatever you see.

Additionally, remember that an important aspect of any gemba walk is creating a dialogue with people and encouraging them to think creatively about work tasks and roadblocks.



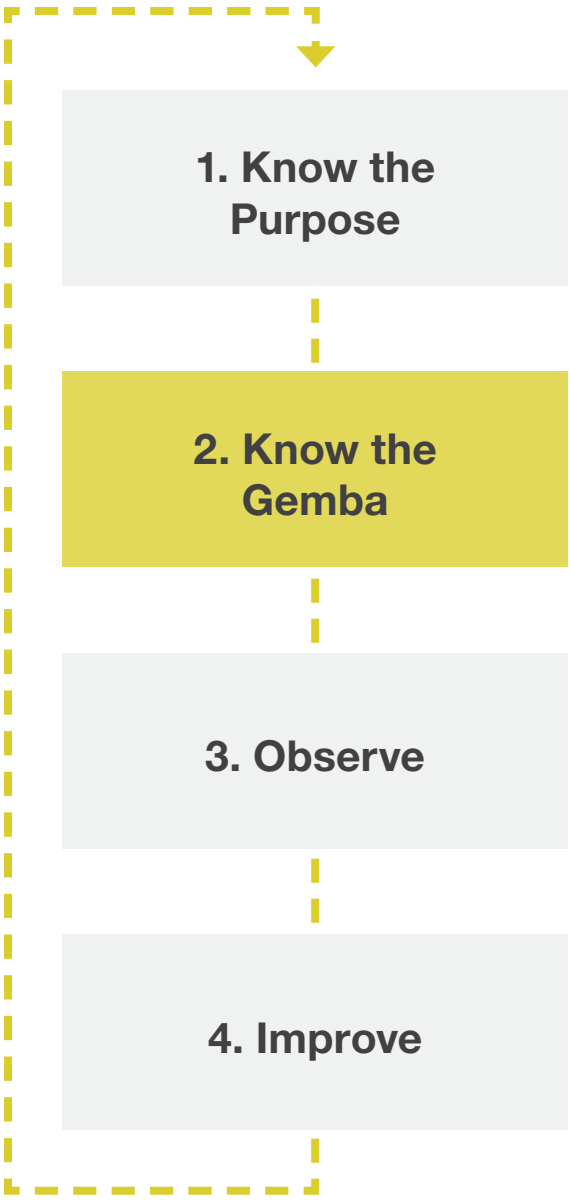
2. Know the Gemba

To observe and assess anything, you need to understand it. So before you head out on your gemba walk, you need to have knowledge of the processes and people in your facility.

Consider what the core activities of your business are and where they're located. You might want to take visits to your manufacturing floor, the place where products are developed, the shipping department, the people in charge of managing suppliers, or even your customer service team. You shouldn't try to visit all of those locations at once, but they're likely all important to the products you create. Determine which ones you plan to visit during a walk. Consider making a schedule for gemba walks if that helps you.

Each organization has different places where value is created, so your business may have many more gembas that you should visit. Whatever the location, know what standard procedures are so when you observe them you can consider how well they are working and whether they should be adjusted.

Remember, though, that you should think of your workplace as a team. Calling something "your" gemba can limit your thinking and restrict teamwork.

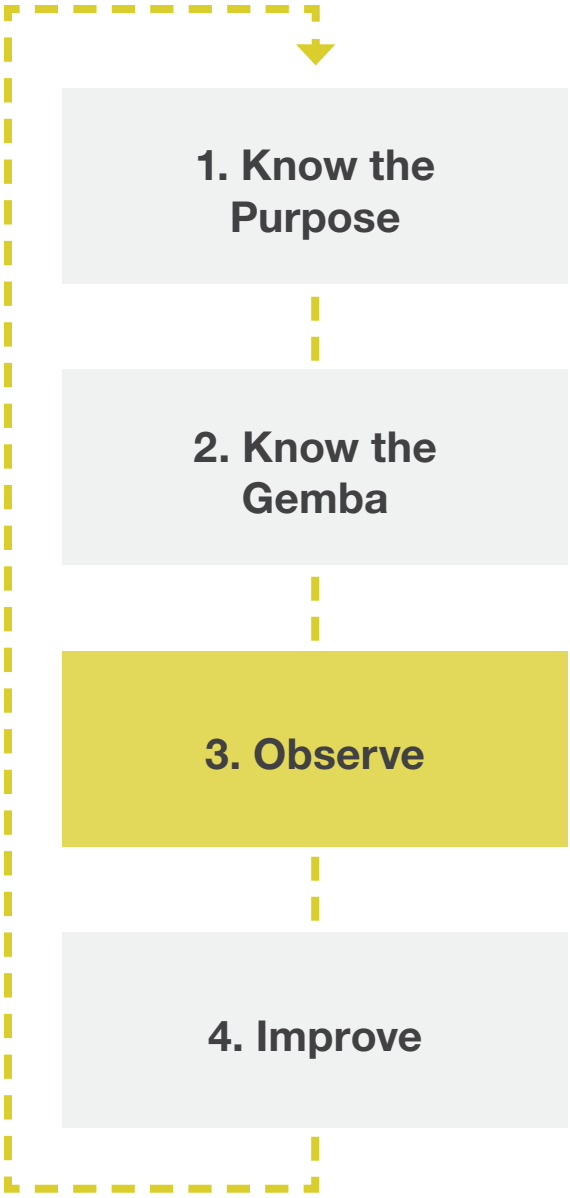


3. Observe

Once you understand the goals and activities that go on in your workplace, it's time to put your new knowledge of gemba into practice and observe. Remember to approach your work without bias and be open-minded. Your attitude will have a large impact on the success of your walk.

During your walk, focus on aspects of your process that are currently of interest. You might examine efficiency, safety, or housekeeping. You might even take a look at your waste pile as a way to see what kinds of defects exist.

As you walk, think about the purpose, the people, and the process. These three ideas are all connected. The purpose of solving a customer's problem is achieved by people and the process. When you see a problem, you can ask how and why something is done, but don't blame or try to correct employees. While at the gemba, focus on taking in information and fostering a discussion.



3. Observe (Continued)

Questions to Consider During a Gemba Walk

Each gemba walk will be different, but these general questions can help you focus on your purpose, people, and process:

- What is working well?
- Is protocol being followed?
- Which activities add value?
- What stations or individuals create value?
- Are expected levels of output being met?
- Are there variations in the process?
- Are there abnormalities in products?
- Is cleanliness a problem?
- Is machinery in good working order?
- Do workers need training or support?
- Is any documentation needed?
- Are tasks done safely?
- Is there any wasted time or resources?

Questions to Ask Workers

First and foremost, you want to observe workers. It's usually better if they don't know a gemba walk will be happening so they behave normally. That being said, you do want to engage them in a dialogue. If you need help starting a conversation with your workers after observing them, here are some questions that can help:

- Can you show me how you perform this task?
- Is it always done this way?
- Do problems ever pop up for you?
- What would you change about this if you could?
- What tools do you use?

Tools to Take on Your Gemba Walk

Don't hide behind technology. Instead, use it to help see, hear, and feel. The rise of inexpensive electronic equipment can aid gemba walks. A manager can go through a plant, office, or warehouse and record information for review later.

Tools to try:

- Tablets or mobile devices for notetaking or audio/video recording
- Cameras/video cameras
- GPS tracking systems to track equipment, supplies, or other moving assets (This can be used to investigate issues found during a walk.)

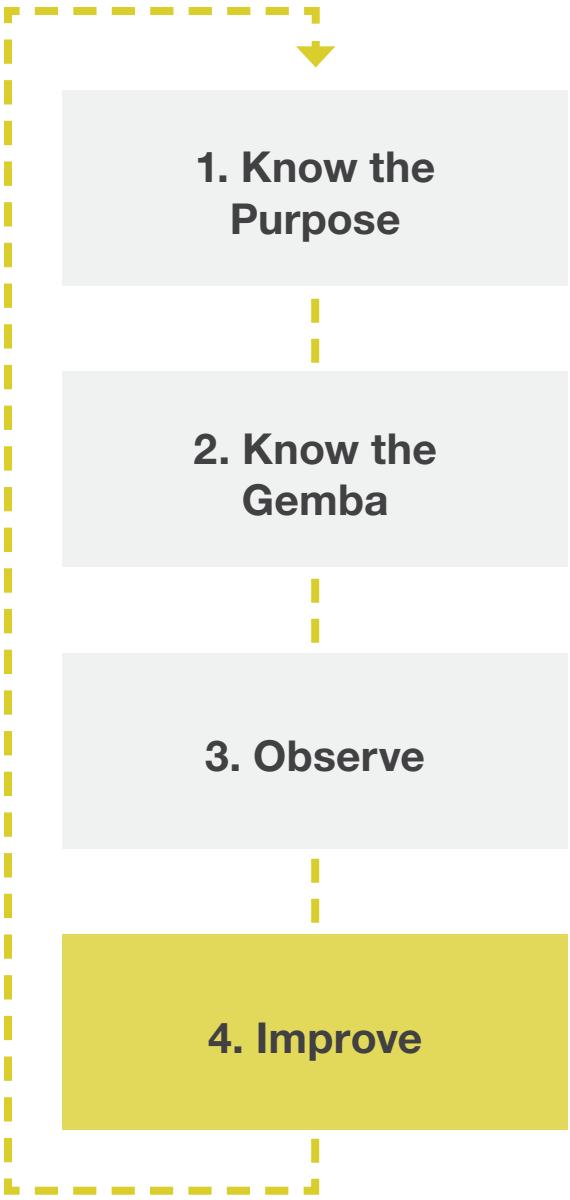
"There was a perception that I was going out to catch people. Over time they understand that I just want to see it like a customer. I can do my job better if I have firsthand exposure to the good, the bad and the ugly."

--Bob Nardelli – CEO
Home Depot

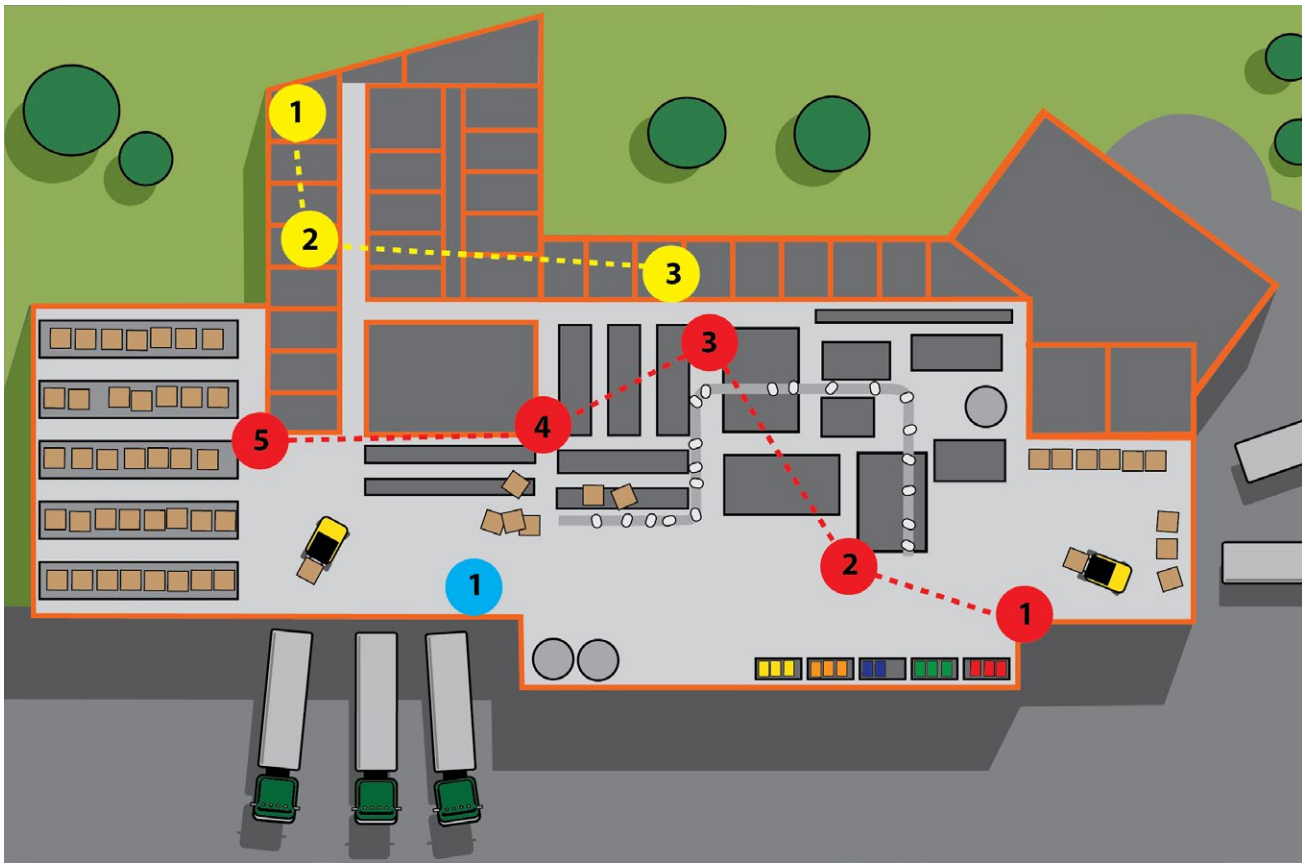
4. Improve

After your walk, reflect on what you've observed. Perhaps you saw employees spending a lot of time walking back and forth to get tools, and some workers suggested rearranging a workstation to reduce this wasted time. Now you can come up with a plan to make the needed changes, determine who will implement them, and follow through to see the adjustments are made. Even better, you can follow up again on a future gemba walk after the changes have occurred to observe whether the process has improved.

Whatever you observed and discussed with workers, consider how those observations can be turned into improvements that will create a better product for your customer.



Example Gemba Walk Schedule



Gemba Walk Schedule

MONDAY

10:00..... Receiving
10:15..... Assembly A
10:30..... Assembly B
10:40..... Packaging
10:50..... Staging

WEDNESDAY

10:00..... Puchasing
10:15..... Accts Rcvb
10:30..... Collections

THURSDAY

10:00.....Shipping

Examining your business' entire value-creation process at once can be overwhelming. You'll end up inundated with information, which can prevent you from seeing all of the details.

Consider the example gemba walk schedule to the left. You might find visiting different parts of your process at different times or even on different days will prove most useful. You can also make it a habit to revisit each part of your process on a regular basis so you can grow accustomed to normal operations and better see variations.

Gemba Reveals Waste

Let's step back for a moment and consider how gemba, a concept that comes from lean manufacturing, relates to other lean ideas. Lean aims to identify and eliminate waste from work processes, ultimately making operations more efficient and less costly.

Waste: Lean

Gemba walks fit in well with this mindset, since they are a helpful tool that managers can use to identify waste in the workplace. Lean focuses on reducing certain types of waste such as over-production, time spent waiting, defects, and unnecessary motion (see a complete list on the next page). Not all gemba walks must focus on waste, but they can if that will be useful for you.

Waste: Muda, Mura, Muri

The concepts of muda, mura, and muri are another lens through which you can look for waste in your facility while on a gemba walk. These terms refer to specific types of imbalances that indicate there could be a problem with your processes. You want to have the right amount of workers handling the right amount of materials to make the appropriate amount of products to meet demand; muda, mura, and muri can help you achieve this. (Learn more about these terms on p.17)

Kaizen

Kaizen, a concept sometimes refered to as "continuous improvement," involves looking for small ways to change the workplace for the better. Kaizen can be used by employees in all levels of an organization and it creates a culture where employees feel comfortable suggesting change. As a manager, when you approach a gemba walk it's a good idea to do so with a kaizen mindset. Look for small changes that could help improve processes and be open to suggestions from employees. (Learn more about kaizen on p.19)

Your Lean Culture

Gemba walks often help strengthen a workplace's lean culture. Workers see managers out in the workplace, they have an opportunity to discuss their work, and they feel valued. Employees that feel valued will likely perform higher quality work, which will end up creating a better end product for your customers.

Go See -
"Senior Management must spend time on the plant floor."

Ask Why -
"Use the "Why?" technique daily."

Show Respect -
"Respect your people."

--Fujio Cho, Chairman of Toyota Motor Corporation

Lean Manufacturing

Lean seeks to eliminate seven kinds of waste. These wastes can help you determine where efficiency could be improved. If a goal of your gemba walk is to identify waste, you might find this list helpful.

Over-production

Definition:

Producing more than the customer needs right now

Examples:

- Producing product to stock based on sales forecasts
- Producing more to avoid set-ups
- Batch processing resulting in extra output

Causes:

- Forecasting
- Long set-ups
- “Just-in-case” for breakdowns

Countermeasures:

- Pull system scheduling
- Heijunka - level loading
- Set-up reduction
- TPM

Transportation

Definition:

Movement of product that does not add value

Examples:

- Moving parts in and out of storage
- Moving materials from one workstation to another

Causes:

- Batch production
- Push production
- Storage
- Functional layout

Countermeasures:

- Flow lines
- Pull system
- Value stream organizations
- Kanban

Motion

Definition:

Movement of people that does not add value

Examples:

- Searching for parts, tools, prints, etc.
- Sorting through materials
- Reaching for tools
- Lifting boxes of parts

Causes:

- Workplace disorganization
- Missing items
- Poor workstation design
- Unsafe work area

Countermeasures:

- 5S
- Point of use storage
- Water spider
- One-piece flow

Waiting

Definition:

Idle time created when material, information, people, or equipment is not ready

Examples:

- Waiting for parts
- Waiting for prints
- Waiting for inspection
- Waiting for machines
- Waiting for information
- Waiting for machine repair

Causes:

- Push production
- Work imbalance
- Centralized inspection
- Order entry delays
- Lack of priority
- Lack of communication

Countermeasures:

- Downstream pull
- Takt time production
- In-process gauging
- Jidoka
- Office kaizen
- TPM

Processing

Definition:

Effort that adds no value from the customer's viewpoint

Examples:

- Multiple cleaning of parts
- Paperwork
- Over-tight tolerances
- Awkward tool or part design

Causes:

- Delay between processing
- Push system
- Customer voice not understood
- Designs "thrown over the wall"

Countermeasures:

- Flow lines
- One-piece pull
- Office kaizen
- Lean design

Inventory

Definition:

More materials, parts, or products

Examples:

- Raw materials
- Work in progress
- Consumable supplies
- Purchased components

Causes:

- Supplier lead-times
- Lack of flow
- Long set-ups
- Long lead-times
- Paperwork in process
- Lack of ordering process

Countermeasures:

- External kanban
- Supplier development
- One-piece flow lines
- Set-up reduction
- Internal kanban

Defects

Definition:

Work that contains errors, rework, mistakes, or lacks something necessary

Examples:

- Scrap
- Rework
- Defects
- Correction
- Field failure
- Variation
- Missing parts

Causes:

- Process failure
- Mis-loaded part
- Batch process
- Inspection quality
- Incapable machines

Countermeasures:

- Poka-yoke
- One-piece pull
- Built-in quality
- 3P
- Jidoka

The 3 M's: Muda, Mura, Muri

Identifying waste using the 3 M's can help you more easily set goals and create conditions that avoid unnecessary repetition of efforts (muda), unevenness of those efforts (mura), or efforts that cause strain (muri).

By focusing improvement activities on eliminating the non-value-adding parts of the production process, balance between capacity and load can be achieved.

Muda refers to waste in the most basic sense: any activity that doesn't add value. Consult the 7 wastes of lean mentioned previously to identify muda in your facility.

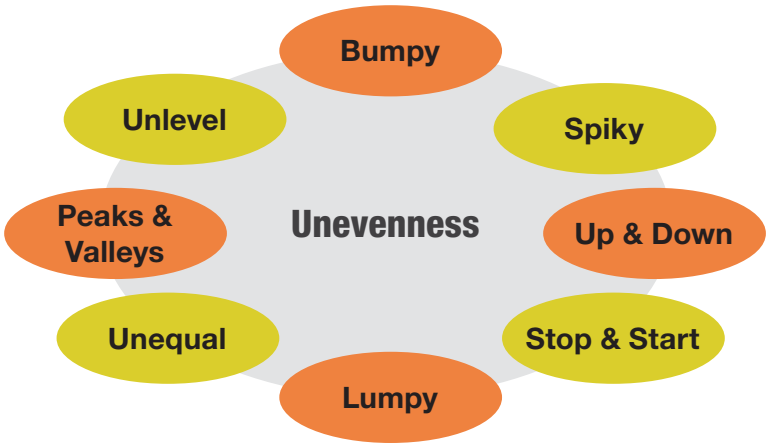
The concepts of mura and muri warrant a little more explanation. Let's take a closer look.

Mura - Unevenness in process or production

Mura occurs because of wasteful allocations of materials or people. For example, employees might be directed to work intensely during the morning shift, which results in a lack of work to do in the afternoon.

This start-speed up-stop scenario can be unhealthy for both workers and machines and can lead to unnecessary fatigue, stress, breakdowns, and accidents.

Elements of Mura

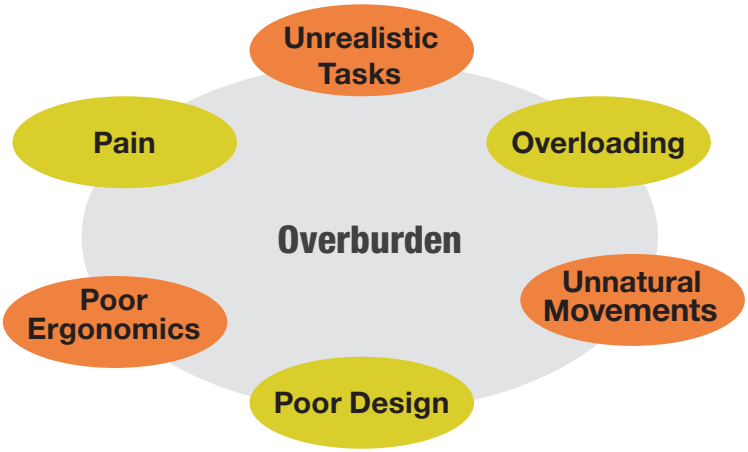


Muri - Overburden of Assets

Muri is the consistent overburden of equipment, facilities, and people. Muri pushes machines or people beyond their natural limits, causing fatigue and stress and increasing the likelihood of an accident.

Overburdening equipment can also lead to breakdowns and increased defects, which results in wasted materials and products.

Elements of Muri



Ask yourself...

When you head out on a gemba walk, keeping muda, mura, and muri in mind can provide a useful starting point for looking at your operations. The questions below can help you determine whether these wastes and misuses of resources are present in your facility.

What Is Creating Waste (Muda)?

Look for and identify:

- Poorly defined or unnecessary activities
- The 7 types of waste (see page 14)
- Damaged tools or machinery

What Is Creating Unevenness (Mura)?

Look for and identify:

- Inconsistent output
- Fluctuations in quality
- Stop / Go process

What Is Creating Strain (Muri)?

Look for and identify:

- Overburdened workers
- Overburdened machinery
- Unbalanced work loads

Poor Visibility = Poor Process and Outcome

Look for and identify:

- Poorly defined directions
- Confusing signals
- Metrics that are not easy to read or understand

Kaizen

Kaizen relies on non-dramatic, long-lasting changes to continually improve the workplace. It is a daily effort made by managers and workers alike. Kaizen typically doesn't cost much money to implement and practice, but because it is used throughout all levels of an organization, it does take time and training.

Managers who take gemba walks can keep the idea behind kaizen - seek small improvements - in mind while observing. Small changes can add up and result in a significantly stronger process.

Part of the kaizen culture involves transfering improvement efforts from management (who traditionally tell workers what to change) to all workers. This ties in well with the dialogue portion of a gemba walk. Managers can ask workers what ideas they have to solve problems, and if workers are already familiar with kaizen, they will likely have some suggestions in mind.

Summary

Recap: Why Gemba?

- See firsthand what is happening
- Help create standard work practices and ensure they are effective
- Hear from employees about what is important to them and what problems they see
- Emphasize values, quality, and safety
- Align departments and teams with the organization's overall goals
- Focus on purpose, process, and people

By taking you to "the real place" where the work is performed, a gemba walk can reveal many things about your business that you might not have otherwise discovered.

Gemba walks allow you to observe any process and they can even be broken down into smaller walks, allowing managers to focus on particular parts of the value-creation process. These walks can help bring inefficiencies and other problems to light that do not add value to the end products you sell to your customers.

Unbiased observation is necessary for a successful gemba walk, and observing in this manner is a skill that is developed over time. New practitioners of the gemba walk should reflect on their experiences after each walk; with time, they will become even more adept observers.

During your walks, remember to focus on not only the process you're examining, but also the purpose of the process and the people involved in it. Ask questions, consider activities from all angles, and listen to workers' own observations about the work being performed.

Although you should make note of problems you see, don't jump in and try to fix them immediately. Doing so can alienate your workers and make them feel like they're being blamed for a problem. Instead, ask workers for input and then consider what viable solutions to the problems you could implement.

Gemba walks are a lean tool that can ultimately increase value and improve your company's lean culture. Prepare for your own walk, and then head out into the workplace to get started.

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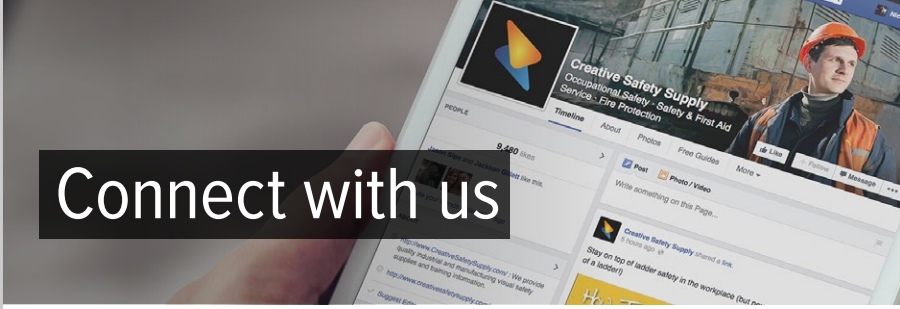

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