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Gemba walks as part of Leader Standard Work

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Contrary to popular belief, Leader Standard Work (LSW) — the process of ensuring standard work processes are in place and consistently followed — is something that is applicable to all levels of leadership to a greater or lesser degree. In this article, CCI advisors Maureen Sobolewski and Mary Williamson discuss gemba walks, and how they relate to LSW. A lot of literature about gemba walks states that leaders should not take a list of questions into the gemba, but should rather go in with an open mind and ask questions as they arise. However, many leaders — especially those new to doing gemba walks — are uncomfortable doing that, and would rather use a guideline. The authors have therefore offered some guidelines on how to perform a gemba walk, with some basic questions to ask.

Building a case for Leader Standard Work

Leader Standard Work (LSW) is the process of ensuring standard processes are in place and are consistently followed. It drives the correct behaviour by shifting the focus of leaders to teaching, coaching, verifying and problem-solving. *Correct behaviour* entails a move away from a 'crisis management' type of leadership, to one of using standardised daily and weekly routines. The process of standardising leadership tasks provides room for improvement because it is easier to improve a documented standard than to improve an ad hoc, haphazardly executed task.



In reality, not all leadership tasks can be standardised, and the higher a person moves up in leadership seniority, the less scope there is for standardised tasks. However, in most leadership positions, there are — to a greater or lesser degree — a fair amount of tasks that can be standardised, such as meetings, problem-solving methodology, observations, reporting and administrative tasks.

To standardize work methods is the sum of all the good ways we have discovered up to present. It therefore becomes the standard. Today's standardization is the necessary foundation on which tomorrow's improvement will be based. If you think of standards as confining, then progress stops. — Henry Ford, Today and Tomorrow, 1926.

Regardless of the level of leadership, gemba walks are undertaken to grasp the situation in current processes.



The link between leader standard work and gemba walks

Gemba is a Japanese word, literally translated as ‘the real place’. In improvement circles, we understand it as the place where the value is added, that is, the location where the actual services are provided or where the work is done. The work may not necessarily always be done on a production line. Your gemba may be a warehouse, an office, on-site utility lines, or a machine shop.

Gemba walks are just one of the many standardised tasks that leaders should be performing on a regular basis. Regardless of the level of leadership, gemba walks are undertaken to grasp the situation in current processes. LSW is about verifying that the standard procedures and processes are being followed at every level. This can only be done by direct observation of the work being done at each level. For instance, work done by operators would be verified on the shop floor. LSW at other levels may be verified by observing a meeting or any other routine standard activity done at any level, such as visual display boards, document trails, process maps and scorecards.

Many leaders want to know exactly how to perform a gemba walk. The answer is difficult to pin down because there’s a certain degree of ‘thinking on your feet’ that must occur as the situation unfolds during your walk through the gemba. However, there are some standards that can be followed.



Leaders should adopt a 'gemba mentality'

Firstly, leaders on a gemba walk need to realise that they cannot and should not provide the answers and solutions to the problems they encounter. They are primarily there to coach the process owners to take ownership of solving problems and developing solutions to make the process more effective and efficient, while also eliminating waste. It is the leader's role to ensure that all the people who are involved in the process are actively engaged in improving it.

People who are engaged and feel that they were a part of the initial scoping and planning of a process are more likely to be enthusiastic about sustaining the improvements. Leaders should therefore embrace their role in the problem-solving process as one of an enabler who encourages at all levels. An enabler is therefore not there to provide answers and solve problems. Rather, the enabler asks guiding and probing questions that help process leaders and teams to identify their own problems and solutions by asking 'what', 'why', 'what if' and 'why not'.

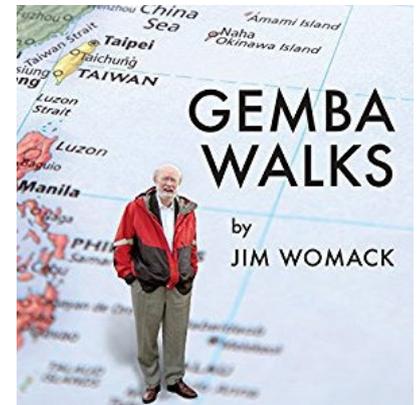
How to do a gemba walk

Jim Womack, in his book entitled *Gemba Walks* tells us, "Go See. Ask Why. Show Respect." These form the foundation of any gemba walk. Leaders have to go where the work is being done; they need to ask questions instead of providing solutions and, lastly, they must show respect.

It's important that the process owner accompanies the leader on the gemba walk. By asking the process leader to take you through the gemba, you are not only showing respect but you are using the gemba walk as an opportunity to coach to the standard, since the process owner is essentially responsible for operating to the standard.

While it is important that the process owner accompanies the leader on the gemba walk, there should also be interaction with those doing the work. People doing the work must be recognised and respected for the fact that they have the most knowledge about the process. The main focus here is on engaging employees in a way that empowers them.

According to Jim Womack, the best way to show respect is to include employees and process owners in the problem-solving process so that they are involved in improving their own work. This increases engagement, buy-in to the solution and sustainability of the solution.





Questions to ask on a gemba walk

Many leaders ask us what questions they should ask on a gemba walk. Since each gemba walk is unique, leaders would need to formulate their own questions and also ask unplanned questions as queries arise on the gemba walk.

However, here is a list of generic questions that can be used as a guide to prompt discussion with the process owner and operator:

- Is there an established, documented standard process for completing this task or activity?
- Has 5S been implemented in this area? If so, is the standard of how the area should be maintained clear? Is it visual?
- How well understood is the standard process to those doing the work? Is it visual? Is it documented?
- Are the standard procedures being followed? (Show me what you use.)
- Is the process being performed to the standard?
- If the process is not being performed to the standard, why do you think this is?
- If the process is not performing to standard, are troubleshooting guides or quick fix procedures available? Are they being used?
- If the process is exceeding the standard, why do you think this is?
- What are the current problems in this process area?
- What can we do to improve the current conditions?
- How can we make the abnormal conditions more immediately visual?

In essence, when on a gemba walk, you are trying to ascertain the following:

- What is the current problem?
- What is causing the problem?
- What should be done to solve the problem?
- How will we know when the problem is eliminated?

Responses to these questions can be challenged and questions can be discussed at every step of the way. In closing, gemba walks are a necessary task that leaders should be performing regularly as part of LSW. Gemba walks should be scheduled into a leader's weekly or monthly plan and this plan should be on the visual management board.

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