

The Many Sides of a Gemba Walk

Editor's note: A follow-up article features three specific examples of gemba walks.

With so many tools available to a continuous improvement professional, it is easy to get overwhelmed and consequently focus on a narrow grouping of tools. Experience expands the practitioner's toolbox, but sometimes it is just as important to return to the foundations to further the path to mastery.

What Is a Gemba Walk?

A gemba (and sometimes genba) walk is the term used to describe personal observation of work – where the work is happening. The original Japanese term comes from *gembutsu*, which means “real thing.”¹ It also sometimes refers to the “real place.” This concept stresses:

- Observation: In-person observation, the core principle of the tool
- Value-add location: Observing where the work is being done (as opposed to discussing a warehouse problem in a conference room)
- Teaming: Interacting with the people and process in a spirit of Kaizen (“change for the better”)

This last point is sometimes a bit misunderstood. In the United States, Kaizen and Kaizen events are usually thought of as a one-week push for a change, usually a step change in performance. Gemba walks can help achieve a step change but can also be used for frequent, incremental improvements – which was the original concept of Kaizen.

What Is a Gemba Walk Not?

A gemba walk is not an opportunity to find fault in others while they are being observed. It is also not a time to enforce policy adherence (except possibly for safety problems or gross violations). If a gemba walk is used punitively, employees will shut down and resistance to change will rise rapidly. A gemba walk needs to be approached from a place of mutual respect and interest in making things faster, safer, easier and just plain better.

A gemba walk is also not the time to solve problems and make changes. This is a time of observation, input and reflection. That does not mean it is the time to ignore operator ideas for improvements or stifle brainstorming, but rather to be open and observe the “real thing” – see what is really happening. If ideas or complaints arise, note them and make sure they are followed up on after the walk. Be mindful not to focus on the details too quickly without seeing the whole.

Solving Problems on the Shop Floor

A sensei routinely encourages their students to get out of the habit of conference room analysis and design, and go to the shop floor to work directly with the operators. With this approach, the need to work through problems or to understand issues at a distance diminishes. The focus shifts from problem solving after the fact, to solving problems live, and eventually to coaching operators directly on how they can solve problems themselves – without the use of a week-long Kaizen event.

The more observation and problem solving that happen with operators on a gemba walk, the more successful and enduring the changes will be. There is no rule that says a practitioner cannot take a gemba walk at any point in a process change. In fact, reviewing ideas, piloting changes and tweaking implementation issues are all great uses of the gemba walk. This is similar to the management by walking around (MBWA) strategy coined by Hewlett Packard. As a practitioner's confidence builds in solving problems with many tools, the more problems you will solve directly on the shop floor and then be able to coach others to recognize their abilities within themselves to solve the challenges they face.

Gemba Walk Compared to Other Data Collection

A frequent objection to a gemba walk is that it cannot be as accurate as an established data acquisition system using statistical process control (SPC) to monitor and improve processes. This argument against a gemba walk is likely to come when trying to solve problems in a strict methodology, more often with individuals who are newer to continuous improvement. But there does not need to be conflict in using all available data.

The key difference between gemba walks and, say, run chart data, is that there are no restrictions or filters on the input data. The only restrictions or filters are a practitioner's mental models (e.g., preconceived notions) that can cause observational biases based on assumptions gathered from past experience. Mental models can both help and hinder process observation.

Let's explore this a bit further. In the case of run chart data, the interaction of two parameters is seen with snapshots over time. A run chart displays a lot of information: how any time period compares to any other time period, historical averages, and prescribed or derived control limits. Hidden in there, however, is a big assumption – that what is being measured is the key variable influencing the output of interest. Said in the more traditional fashion, the assumption is that the run chart measures the vital X driving the big Y.

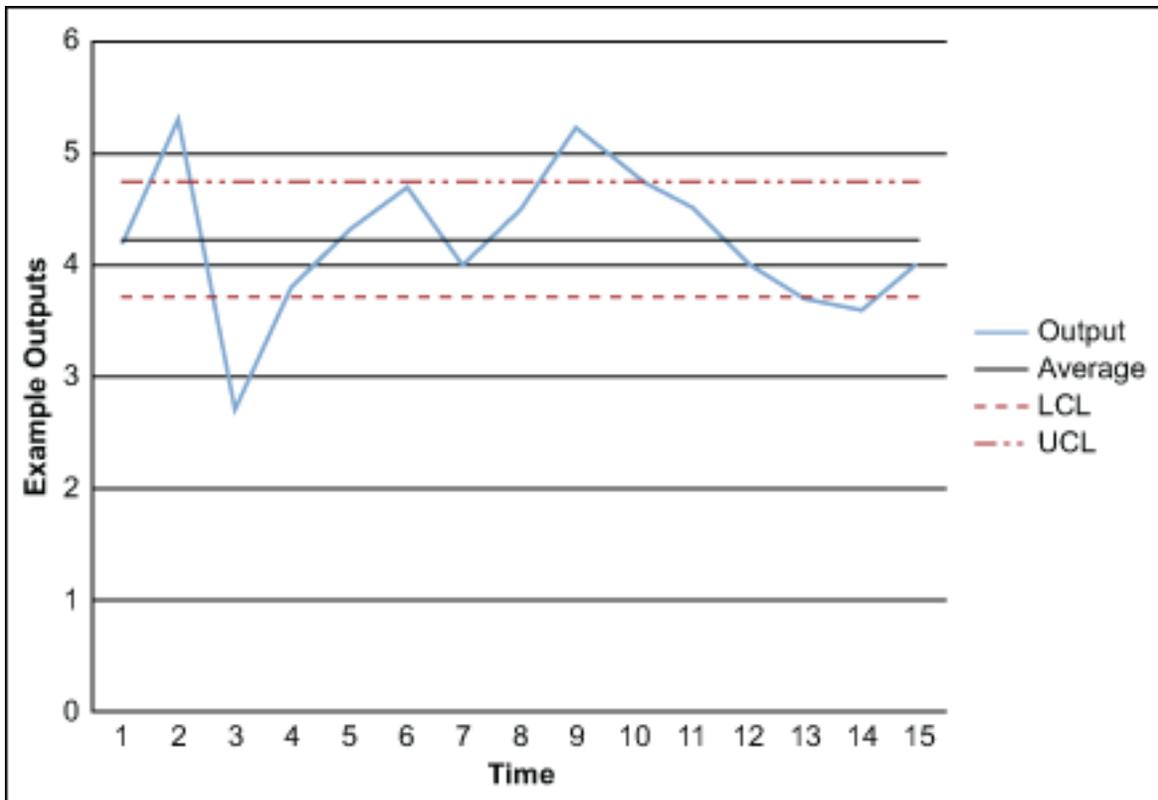
The social momentum created from a run chart is a blessing and a curse. The blessing, shown in the figure below, is that it helps maintain the status quo as far as this X and Y relationship goes. A run chart also leads to the psychological effects of authority and consistency; these two social norms are powerful in regard to directing human behavior to rally around a common, central tendency.² Because the patterns shown in a run chart are compelling, it can leave practitioners open to false

security and, at times, incorrect decisions. What if the whole problem is wrong? What if the process dependency of the big Y on vital X changed such that X is no longer vital or is, at the least, diminished? What if Y is no longer relevant?

In contrast to the streamlined information from a run chart, which provides process feedback at a glance, observing a process opens an individual up to a flood of visual data. The amount of data the human eye takes in is estimated at approximately that of an Ethernet connection, or from 10 million to 100 million bits of data per second.³ That flood of data from observation can be especially overwhelming when encountering a process unfamiliar to you. This is where mental models make life easier, in a sense, because they filter the incoming data, synthesize it into accessible bits of information and deliver conclusions. Although this constantly happens without any effort – and dramatically speeds an individual’s ability to react to situations – it is not helpful on a gemba walk.

Consider supervisors providing work direction to the floor personnel; an individual’s eye tends to look at how well supervisory instruction is executed. The mental model is narrowed to how well people follow orders. The supervisory instructions, however, may be inadequate. By relaxing the mental model that restricted perceptions to only one area to illuminate problems, it is possible to be

Example of Control Chart with Control Limits



more open to finding solutions. Although this can require only a subtle shift in awareness and perception, the observed waste and subsequent conclusions may be completely different.

Being aware of mental models is the first step in allowing more data to stream into conscious observations of processes. This is one reason an outsider is a valuable team member – they tend to have fewer preconceived ideas about how the current process or system works and can facilitate team learning. With experience and presence of mind, anyone’s observation skills can improve. Those improved skills help an individual to ask better questions and to focus on mentoring operators in solving their own problems.

References

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What Comes After a Gemba Walk?

For starters, ask the following questions: Where did your walk take you and what did you see? Whom did you speak with and what did you hear?

Bill Kirkpatrick, Senior Lean Expert, Life Cycle Engineering | Jun 30, 2015

I’m sure most of you reading this have at some point in your career heard the term Gemba and its translation to “the real place.” I like to think of it as simply where work occurs. The Gemba walk process is just that -- taking a walk through Gemba.

The topic is often covered in articles and presentations, with the common theme involving leadership going to the floor and “seeing” what’s going on. This is a proven process that is time well spent by any mid- to high-level manager or leader to 1) be seen and 2) gain an understanding of the true pulse of the factory floor. Remember that a Gemba walk doesn’t always have to involve the factory floor; your Gemba could involve an office setting.

Going on a Gemba walk is an opportunity to capture topics and concerns pertaining to how effective your facility (factory or office) is performing from a shop-floor perspective. This is a little different

from what you get from your daily review of performance metrics. Before we discuss what comes after, let's look at what it takes to prepare and execute an effective walk through your Gemba.

In preparation and execution of a Gemba walk:

- Have a theme or topic for your Gemba walk; however, avoid preparing questions beforehand. A theme could be based on performance (good or bad) or due to a customer's complaint or praise. Walking with a theme and having discussions with people in Gemba related to something they have recently heard or been impacted by sends a powerful message: The organization cares enough to spend time learning from, and spending time with, people in Gemba.
- Depending on the size of your factory, have a planned route. In larger facilities it's wise to keep track of where you've been so as not to spend too much time away from one area. Sometimes the theme will dictate your route, and in smaller work places it's fine to simply walk, watch and listen.
- Be on the lookout for waste and seek input from people in Gemba. They most likely know far more about what's going on than you'll ever know from looking at charts and sitting in meetings.
- Ask open-ended questions. Try to avoid asking questions that people would answer with a simple yes or no.
- Write down what you **see** and **hear**, and note **who** you talk to. Most leaders at some point facilitate or at least participate in all-hands meetings or other settings where large groups are pulled together. This is a perfect time to mention some of the dialog during past Gemba walks.

You've completed your Gemba walk, so what happens now? In past experiences working with clients and peers alike, the time immediately following the walk comes down to the notion that I've "checked the box" or "whew, glad that's over, it's a mess out there" or "wait till I get my hands on..." and then it's off to the next meeting to pound the operations folks on what you saw or, worse yet, what you heard. Not the most effective use of your time in Gemba. Imagine what your workforce goes through upon such actions coming out of your time on the floor.

Now let's look at what an effective post-walk process consist of.

For starters, ask the following questions: Where did your walk take you and what did you see? Whom did you speak with and what did you hear? These are fundamental questions you should ask yourself when you have completed your Gemba walk. A Gemba walk that ends once the walk is over is like a meeting that yields no actions on the topic discussed. Why did the meeting take place at all – thus why did I just go on this walk?

The following outlines an effective approach for getting the most out of your post-Gemba walks.

Post-Gemba walk, follow-up process:

- After your walk, spend some time reflecting and capture key takeaways from your time at Gemba.
 - Think Value vs. Non-Value (Waste).
- Take time to categorize your thoughts, findings and discussion points, and within a week or so provide feedback to employees on your walks. The feedback would be what you heard or saw and, more importantly, what you and your leadership team plan to do to address any concerns. Be careful in timing your communication. Communicating too early without having enough time to fully understand the issues could lead to even bigger issues. And don't wait too long. People may feel you've simply "checked the box."
- Use Pareto and/or trend charts for evaluation as you continue your walks over time.
 - Types of Waste encountered (the eight wastes of lean).
 1. Over Production – making more than customer demand
 2. Over Processing – there is such a thing as over-delighting your customers.
 3. Too Much Inventory – goods between processes often show bottlenecks.
 4. Defects/Re-Work – look at what's in the trash; it may surprise you.
 5. Waiting/Delays – people not adding value due to a variety of delays
 6. Transporting – look for how your goods move through the process.
 7. Motion – how much movement do your people expend in the process?
 8. Loss of creativity – think outside the box and listen to what your people are saying.
 - Keep track of how many people you actually made contact with. You can do this using a layout of your plant and pins depicting where you've been. Over time, try to make contact with all people in the work place. It may be hard to imagine, but once the expectation is set of you walking through Gemba, most people will actually be looking forward to having you come to their area.
- Use this information with your leadership team as part of your continuous improvement process. Topics or issues discussed or things you saw during the walk should align with your operations performance metrics in some form, and this should be one basis for future project work to improve safety, quality, cost and delivery.
- Follow up with any individuals who offered key insights or asked questions that you needed more time to answer.
- Once you've mastered the Gemba walk process, encourage others within your leadership team to do their own Gemba walks. However don't fall into the trap of thinking that your walks as the

leader aren't important anymore once your team is effectively walking their areas. As the leader you still need to be seen and heard on a routine basis.

To insure you get the most out of your Gemba walk, make sure you have a good process for preparation and execution. Just as important is having a good post-walk, follow-up process. A robust post-walk, follow-up process closes the loop for an effective Gemba walk and provides meaningful actions that will lead to a better Gemba.

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NOTE - I DISAGREE WITH HIS METHOD

Improving the Gemba Walk: Do's & Don'ts for Managers and Employees

By [Nancy Bach](#) - March 30, 2017

The concept of a Gemba walk comes from TPS, the Toyota Production System. Simplistically, the Japanese word Gemba refers to the site or the workplace. A Gemba walk involves a leader going to the workplace for accurate information rather than sitting in an office or conference room making changes without knowing what is happening in the real world.

Key Features of a Gemba Walk

A Gemba walk is very focused. The intent is for the manager or leader to gather a small cross-functional team to "go see" a specific area of a process and "ask why," related to the details of a process. This yields plenty of fodder for root cause analysis and continuous improvement cycles that will help drive out the eight wastes and increase value for the customer.

For best results, create a value stream map with validation from early workplace visits. Use this map to identify where in the flow to focus each Gemba walk. Select one process and follow it from start to end. This focus is key for keeping a manageable scope for each regular Gemba walk. It also helps avoid dysfunctional activity from the silo thinking that happens if only partial process elements are studied, leading to optimizing some elements but sub-optimizing the flow.

If Gemba walks are perceived as a manager doing a walk through simply to determine where to reduce headcount, engagement efforts will fail. The Gemba walk can only be successful when it is built on a foundation of trust and mutual respect. To be self-sustaining, the Gemba experience must

be positive rather than punitive for both the leaders and the employees. Provide communication and training upfront so both employees and managers know what to expect when Gemba walks happen.

Employee Gemba Do's and Don'ts

Employees may feel uncomfortable during Gemba walks because they are in the somewhat unusual role of spending extended time with the boss, feeling that they need to defend their work or maybe even tell the boss he's wrong about something. An emphasis on the intent of a Gemba walk as a focus on the process rather than on people helps avoid discomfort. Training should include a few specifics on dos and don'ts for the employee's role in the Gemba activity.

Manager Gemba Do's & Don'ts

The manager may also feel awkward, out of her comfort zone, away from her normal strategic responsibilities and dropped into the nitty-gritty details of a process where she is not an expert. It's important for the manager to step out of the leadership role and look to the process operator as the expert. These dos and don'ts can be good reminders.

What About MBWA?

MBWA or Management By Wandering (or Walking) Around might look similar to Gemba because managers are out in the workplace instead of in their offices. They're interacting with employees and hopefully building positive relationships and learning something they didn't already know. But if wandering is all that happens, the benefits are limited.

Do's & Don'ts

Gemba Walks for Employees

Do

- **DO** feel free to suggest areas of focus within the process.
- **DO** explain the process as it is, not as the SOP says it should be or the way you think the manager wants to hear.
- **DO** be prepared to show performance boards and explain ties between the physical process and the reported results.
- **DO** realize that you may know the process better than the manager so he may ask many questions, some of them "dumb," in order to get up to speed. Be patient and helpful.
- **DO** understand that the manager's fresh eyes looking at the process may see simple opportunities that you just don't notice or agree with. Be open-minded.
- **DO** offer observations and suggestions for analysis or improvement.

Don't

- **DON'T** make unrelated complaints (e.g. personnel problems, wages, unrelated issues). Use other communication avenues.
- **DON'T** expect changes to be put in place overnight. Problem resolution for issues that come up during the Gemba walk will happen after reflection.
- **DON'T** expect answers to all your questions on the spot.
- **DON'T** try to impress. Be yourself and speak for the process.
- **DON'T** be afraid. This is a time for shared focus on the process, not fear of punishment.

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Remember that continuous improvement is most effective when it follows a systems thinking structure such as Lean. Individual process steps are part of an overall value stream. Using the value stream map to identify areas to prioritize gap analysis and execute gap closure efforts will provide the biggest gains within the framework of the whole flow. Gemba walks have that focus. “Wandering around,” even when it results in localized improvements, is not likely to provide sustainable gains leading to an optimized system.

1. Gemba walks build relationships with those who do the work and create value in the organization.
2. Interacting with employees at the gemba enables leaders to uncover problems and eliminate them quickly.
3. Gemba walks provide leaders with the opportunity to praise people for the good work that they do.
4. Management can be sure that the work that needs to be done is getting done.
5. Goals and objectives can be clearly communicated face-to-face.
6. A visible leader can increase 6 employee engagement.

Do's & Don'ts



Gemba Walks for Managers

Do

- **DO** no harm. Wear appropriate safety gear, follow safety rules, avoid disrupting the process.
- **DO** explain on each visit why you're in the workplace.
- **DO** engage with the process leadership to ensure safe access to the process.
- **DO** engage with the people doing the work itself rather than the area's staff or mid-managers.
- **DO** lots of questioning and listening and not much talking.
- **DO** plan and complete you reflection after each Gemba.
- **DO** be sure that you follow through if during the Gemba you promise to do something or answer a question. It is better to say "I don't know" than to give bad information.
- **DO** track observations, preferably in a system that can manage later action item tracking as reflections move to root cause analysis, gap closure planning, and countermeasure implementation.
- **DO** build in time for Gemba walks daily... or at least 45 minutes a week.

Don't

- **DON'T** worry about looking "dumb." This is your opportunity to learn, not to lecture.
- **DON'T** show off your "superior intellect." Frankly, when it comes to the workplace, it's likely that the operator is the expert in how his or her process works and you as manager have much to learn.
- **DON'T** go alone, but don't overwhelm workers with a large entourage of staffers.
- **DON'T** punish people during the gemba or create an after-the-fact punishment process. Be sure you're not looking for the opportunity to catch someone in the act of doing something wrong.
- **DON'T** make changes on the spot or make promises for specific changes.
- **DON'T** rush. If you're pressed for time, schedule the Gemba walk when you won't have to rush through.



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