

Quality info

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Introduction to GEMBA

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 article, 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.

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 preconceived 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.



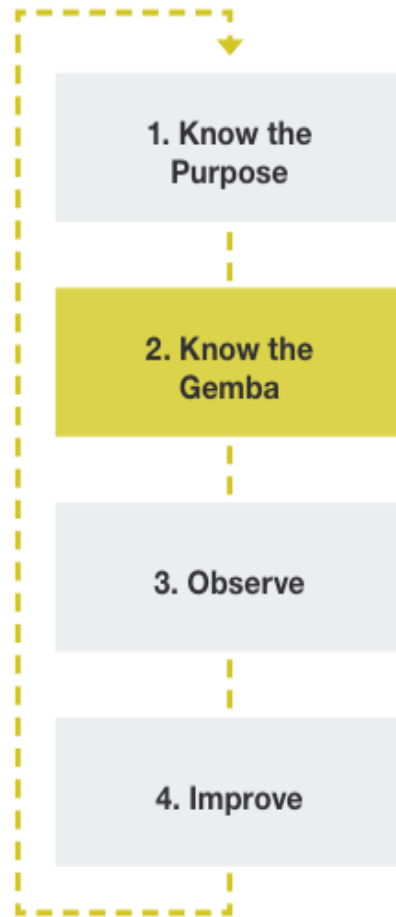
2. Know the Gemba

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.



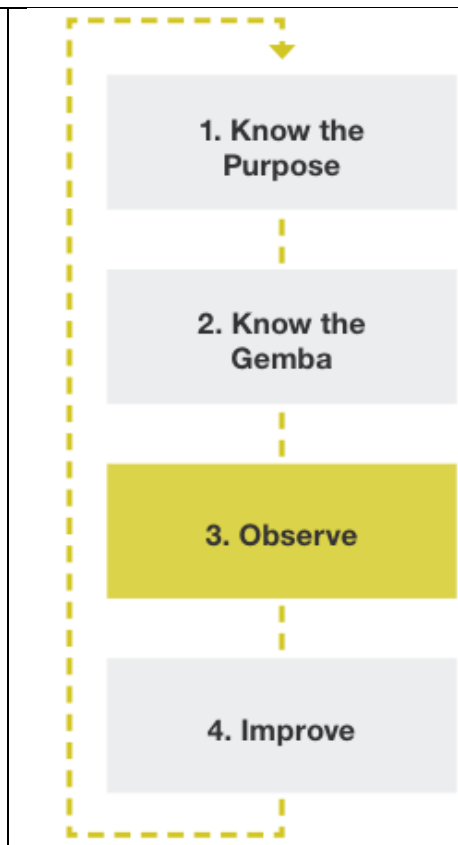
3. Observe

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.



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.

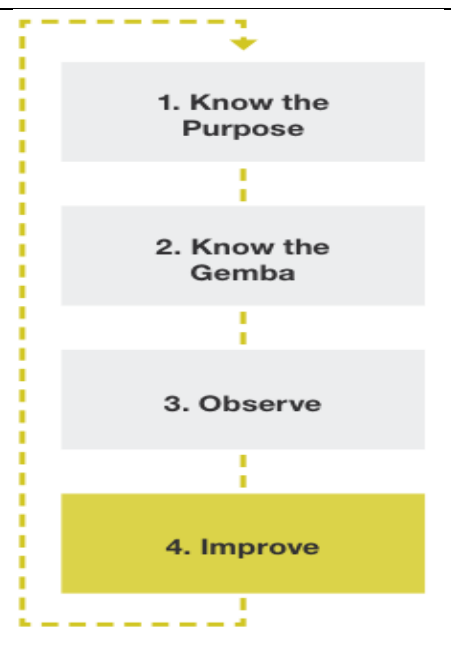
Tools to try:

- 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.)

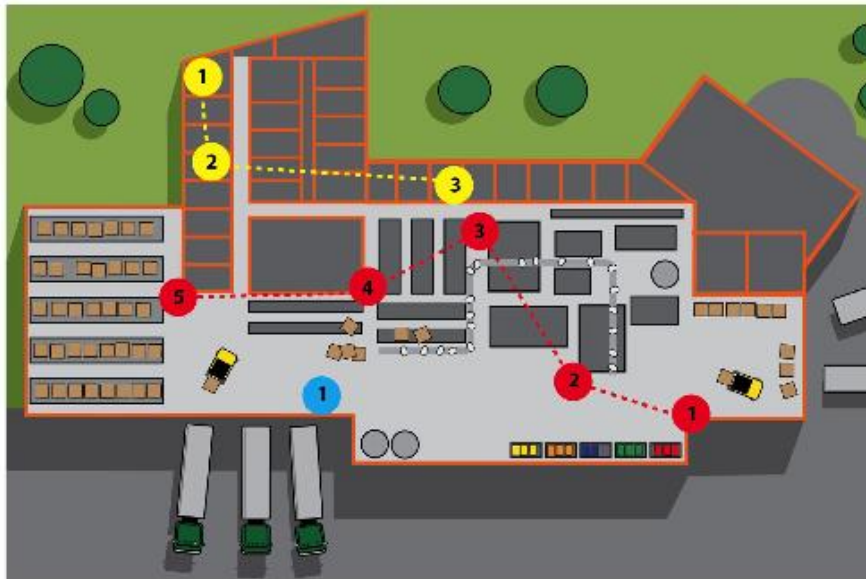
4. Improve

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.....	Purchasing
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.

To be continued in the next issue.

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