

WALKING THE GEMBA

John Compton, Professor Emeritus, Rochester Institute of Technology

As a Lean and continuous improvement consultant, I often have the opportunity to assess the production operations of printing companies. After reviewing relevant documents and conducting discussions with senior management about past performance, the current state of the business, problems and concerns, and goals of the organization, I start by walking the workflow from receipt of an order to the shipment of the product. In the language of Lean manufacturing, this is known as “going to the gemba” or “going on a gemba walk.” *Gemba* is a Japanese term that roughly translates to “the place where actual work is done.” The reference to the gemba in Lean manufacturing also is taken to mean the “place where value is created for the customer.”

In Lean manufacturing we distinguish between those activities that add value and those that don't. For an activity to be value-added it must be:

- Something the customer is willing to pay for
- Done correctly the first time
- Something that transforms the product in some fashion

Those activities that do not meet one or more of these requirements are identified as waste and are targeted for elimination. Therefore, waste is any activity that uses resources but creates no value for the customer. Eight major categories of waste have been identified.

- 1. Over-production.** Making more earlier or faster than required by the next process.
- 2. Inventory.** Any supply in excess of a one-piece flow through the process—raw materials, work in process, or finished goods.
- 3. Waiting.** Idle time waiting for people, materials, equipment, information, etc.
- 4. Transportation.** Transporting parts or materials around the plant.
- 5. Motion.** Any movement of people, tooling, and equipment that does not add value to the product or service.
- 6. Over-processing.** Extra effort that adds no value to the product from the customer's viewpoint.
- 8. Defective product.** Time and materials wasted producing unacceptable products.
- 7. People.** Not fully using people's mental and creative experience and capabilities.

Finding, eliminating, and preventing these eight types of waste is the major objective of a Lean implementation. Initial assessments I've

conducted over the past five years at eight different printing companies show that, on average, value is being added to the product only 9% of the time from receipt of the order through shipment of the product. Thus, the continuous reduction or elimination of the eight wastes that reside in the gemba can result in surprisingly large reductions in costs and lead times while improving the quality of the product received by the customer. Knowing what is actually happening in the gemba is the first step in understanding improvement opportunities.

In a printing company, the gemba can be anywhere value is being added to the product, but often the focus is on the shop floor. The purpose of a gemba walk is to grasp the current situation where value is supposedly being added so we can begin a dialogue about it. The more we understand about the current condition, the more informed and fruitful will be the discussions. I typically begin my gemba walks at the point where customer orders are entered since, from a lead time perspective, this is where the clock starts.

There are three simple guidelines to follow for a gemba walk.

Guideline 1: Go and See

You cannot truly grasp the actual situation in the gemba by sitting in an office or conference room and looking at spreadsheets. It requires that you physically go and observe what is really happening. The purpose is to gather facts and understand the processes and people in the gemba. Some things to think about:

- Get a feel for what is actually happening. Try to envision what is supposed to be happening. Visualize in your mind a smooth, totally value-added workflow.
- Try to understand why the process is other than you visualized it. What disrupts the work? Where could errors be made, and what prevents those errors from occurring?
- Look for backtracking or rework. Are things where they are actually needed? Do people have to look around for things?
- How do people know what they should be doing? What are their sources of information? Is information readily available, or do they have to hunt for it or “guess” at it? Is the “right thing” done the “right way,” and is it crystal clear to even the casual observer (you)?
- Is there a pace to the work? How do you know if things are on time?

- How well do the people see problems? When a person encounters a problem, what happens? Is there a support system to help the person? By what method do they discover and solve problems?
- Your job is not to fix the problems, your job is to teach your people how to see them and eliminate them.
- Look for the eight wastes, because they are everywhere.

Guideline 2: Ask Questions

Once you're in the gemba using your observational skills, you will need additional information to develop a good understanding of what is actually happening. This is done by asking questions of people. The best questions are open-ended, since they allow people to provide more explanation. Your job is to seek to understand what they do and what their issues are. The frontline people are the experts at their job function, so ask about what you are seeing. Some good open-ended questions to ask are:

- What happens here?
- How do you do this work? Is there a standard? Is the activity clearly specified as to content, sequence, timing, and outcome?
- How do you know you are doing this work correctly? What is your performance against the standard?
- How do you know if the output of your work is free of defects? To whom does the output of your work go? What kind of discussions do you have with your internal customers?
- What do you do when you encounter a problem?
- How do you know if things are improving or getting worse?
- What can be done to improve the current condition?
- Why is this a problem?
- What do you think needs to change?
- What barriers stop you from improving?
- How does this affect you?
- Perhaps the best of all open-ended questions is "Why?" such as "Why are things done this way?" or "Why do you think this problem occurs?" Repeated use of "why" questions helps you get closer to root causes and conditions.

There are literally hundreds of questions that can be asked, and the right questions will in large part be determined by the type of work being done as well as the objective of the gemba walk you take. Some common objectives for a gemba walk are:

- Determine how customer value is created
- Determine if processes are capable of serving customers well
- Assess workplace organization (i.e., 5S)

- To look for waste (the eight wastes)
- To look for problems

It's important to have a clearly defined and well-understood purpose for the gemba walk before you take it. This helps to eliminate confusion and permits everyone who is participating to view things through the same lens. It also clarifies the expectations for everyone involved.

Guideline 3: Treat People with Respect

When we go to the gemba, it is imperative to show respect to all the people who do value-creating work. The most immediate way to show respect to people is to listen carefully to the answers to your open-ended questions. While in the gemba, you can show respect by resisting distractions, making notes, keeping to the point of the question, repeating and summarizing answers, and making eye contact. All of these indicate to the person that you are focused on them. Also, during the gemba walk, be careful not to make judgments, become defensive, or interrupt the other person while they are responding.

To improve processes by eliminating non-value-added work requires that we enlist the brainpower and problem-solving abilities of everyone, especially those working in the gemba. You will have to rely on them to solve problems and improve processes just as you do for them to come to work and do their job. The extent to which a company invests in the growth and development of its employees is a measure of respect. This investment, coupled with the challenge to use their creativity and innovation to bring improvement to their jobs and the company is the most effective way of showing respect and for achieving a high rate of improvement.

Walking the gemba is a highly effective method for driving improvement. However, there is a lot more to a successful gemba walk than getting up from your desk and wandering out to the shop floor. I encourage you to learn more about this technique, and the references below are a good place to start.

FOR MORE INFORMATION



Gemba Walks, 2nd Ed.
Jim Womack, Lean
Enterprises Institute
<http://prnt.in/ZzE>



"Going to the Gemba"
by Jamie Flinchbaugh
<http://prnt.in/ZzD>



***"10 Rules for Good
Gemba Walks"***
by Jon Miller
<http://prnt.in/ZzA>



The Toyota Way
by Jeffrey Liker
<http://prnt.in/ZzZ>



"12 Leader Standard Work Questions to Ask on the Gemba"
by Jon Miller
<http://prnt.in/ZzR>