



The Ultimate Guide to the Gemba Walk



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Introduction

In manufacturing, leaders often adopt continuous improvement processes to improve their operational efficiency. Tactics include [root cause analysis](#) and [5s audits](#). Lean manufacturing ideals and tactics encourage identifying and brainstorming ways to drive better, and better results. However, disconnected leaders that dictate procedure and policy risk hurting performance more than they help. Regular visits to the shop floor can help keep them connected.

This guide explains the key elements of the Gemba Walk, examines which elements are most important to a successful gemba walk, and the challenges and benefits to look out for when adding this process to your continuous improvement arsenal.

Key elements of a gemba walk

 <p>observe, don't correct Not meant to be a corrective exercise</p>	<p>value add activities What is working about this process?</p>	 <p>innovate and improve conditions, tools, and procedures Remove the elements that are detrimental to production</p>
<p>seek to understand Why is it this way?</p>	 <p>subtracting value Where are you losing value in the existing process? Why?</p>	

What is the Definition of Gemba Walk?

Gemba is a Japanese term defined as "the actual place". In manufacturing, the shop floor is the gemba, the "actual place *manufacturing* is completed". A gemba walk is a tour of the shop floor. The "gemba walk" bridges theory and practice by bringing leaders to the shop floor to observe processes as they happen. This result is the definition of "gemba walk".

Regular gemba walks ensure managers observe their shop floor's operational reality. Gemba walks highlight how processes on the floor differ from [standard operating procedures \(SOPs\)](#). With focus, this exercise can generate ideas on how to innovate these processes. Beware, this isn't meant to be a corrective exercise. Instead, it should encourage the observer to seek an understanding of why practices differ. Participants should focus on how the *actual* process is delivering or subtracting value.

While touring a shop floor, gemba participants gain additional context into their SOPs. Then leaders can apply this insight towards improving the conditions, tools, and procedures that are detrimental to production. Leaders are more consider of their decision's impact when managers and operators both experience the shop floor.



Gemba Walk: Step by Step

- 01 Understand the process SOP**
Review the existing standard operating procedure and performance targets for the process you'll be observing.
- 02 Focus on the process vs. individual people**
Avoid interrupting, scolding, or adjusting the folks involved in the process you're observing.
- 03 Record observations and attendance**
Without standardizing, collecting, and converting your data, gleaning these insights is impossible.
- 04 Identify next steps and follow up ownership**
Without follow through, the observations and recommendations won't be implemented.

Observation, the source of Gemba power

Sounds great, right? The case for a gemba walk is the case for making decisions based on real-world data. Put that way, the statement “complete regular gemba walks to make better decisions” sounds like a truism. Yet, the key to the gemba walk is not just collecting data. True observation requires more than witnessing what is happening in front of you.

According to the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, observation includes both noticing what happens around you, and then arranging and manipulating that information to produce understanding and actionable insights. Simply put: Understanding = Seeing + Processing. Gemba practitioners realized that it wouldn't be enough to watch the shop floor.

Outside of manufacturing, companies are leveraging the power of observation to better understand their employees, customer, and potential new markets for their products. Ethnography is an observational form of qualitative research that anthropologists use to study groups of people.

Ken Anderson, an anthropologist and researcher at Intel, explains that through ethnography, “researchers discover otherwise elusive trends that inform [Intel's] future strategies.”

Beyond highlighting trends and insights, observation helps align a manager's perception with reality. Perception is a combination of what someone hears, sees, and thinks. What happens when decision makers don't see what is happening on the shop floor? They rely on second hand information. Sometimes, this is from people who are also disconnected from the shop floor.

If a factory is failing to meet targets, leaders who do not complete gemba walks may assume the worst of their team. This ruminating, or “focused attention on the symptoms of one's distress, and on its possible causes and consequences, as opposed to its solutions”, hurts team morale and performance. In this example, imagine the true cause of missed targets is due to faulty materials, old machinery, or other negative gemba conditions. Harsh feedback towards operators' work ethic will not go over well with the team.

Avoiding the Pitfalls of “Quick Wins”

In addition to efficiency focused initiatives, gemba walks help ensure leaders clearly define goals at each level of the company. Shop floors with obscure goals likely won't benefit as much from a gemba walk with clear goals. McKinsey details an example of this wherein an aerospace manufacturer's lean initiatives in production didn't focus on performance targets.

They valued [“quick wins” instead](#). Those initiatives didn't help production hit their targets. This incentivized the sales team to start “circumventing the production-scheduling system in order to speed their own products through the queue”. This chain of events “undercut many of the efficiency gains the [lean] experts managed to create.” In this instance, metrics brought the leadership team back to the shop floor, where

“line workers later showed executives a schedule indicating that one machine, chosen at random, was to perform 250 hours of work during an 8-hour shift. This revelation spurred the executives to refocus the program, investigate the organizational factors behind the difficulties, and ultimately identify much more far-reaching solutions—starting with an effort to get sales and operations to collaborate in setting production priorities and to work together on a daily basis.”

Setting and tracking progress towards performance goals combined with regularly visiting the gemba can drive operational performance improvements.

Aligning perception and reality is a potential benefit of a gemba walk. But, participants' perceptions are tricky and can also be one of the greatest pitfalls of the gemba walk.

Perception

Thoughtful observation provides unique value because observation is key to perception. Perception can be reality for decision makers. It is influenced by a variety of factors. Koch [writes](#) in the Scientific American, “conscious perception of the world, though relatively stable, is not static. We are incapable of being fully objective, even in our most mundane observations and impressions. Our awareness of the objects around us is informed and fine-tuned by any number of transient factors—our strength and energy levels, our sense of confidence, our fears and desires.”

Give structure and goals to the gemba walk to avoid introducing excess [subjectivity](#). This is the difference between structured and unstructured observation. Unlike ethnographers, gemba observers need to know a process's target result, and official procedure. This helps guide their observation and avoid distractions. With this information the observer can see what is happening on the shop floor in a specific process context. Then they can identify opportunities for waste reduction.

Adding a method to the Gemba walk madness

Applying a theoretical framework can also guide observation during a gemba walk. It might be easiest for your team to adopt a lean framework since they're likely already familiar with them. Popular approaches include applying the 6Ms of production as an efficiency framework. The 6Ms stand for Method, Mother Nature aka "Environmental", Man, Measurement, Machine and Materials. This framework focuses observation during the gemba on factors involved in and surrounding the production process.

Frameworks to help structure your walk



6Ms

Method, Mother Nature, Man, Measurement, Machine and Materials



8 Wastes

Defects, Excess process, Over production, Waiting, Inventory, Moving, Motion, Idle talent



Design thinking

Resolve, Adopt, Use, Prototype, Employ, Deploy



5 Whys

Problem, Why, Why, Why, Why, Why

Another lean framework to consider is the 8 Wastes. These are Waiting, Transporting, Overproduction, Inappropriate Processing, Excess Inventory, Excess Motion, and Defects. In this framework observers focus on factors involved in and surrounding the production process.

Some of the elements of a good gemba walk are already inherent principles of design thinking. For example, design thinking exercises are structured. Structure guides people through a process. It gives them confidence that they are doing the right thing. This can inspire ideas without fear of failure.



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Try combining a lean and [design thinking framework](#). Structure and collect data on the gemba walk, using paper or [digital tools](#). Encourage participants to seek to understand the operators participating in the process. Encourage participants to brainstorm ways to help production achieve the performance target by optimizing the existing process. Develop alternatives by prototyping and a/b testing lines with an update against the existing to see if the assumptions were correct before implementing changes.

Leveraging this additional structure will improve the likelihood the gemba walk yields positive adjustments.

Tracking Attendance and Collecting Data

Shop floors around the world are encouraging gemba walks right now. They have schedules so that different team members participate. They use tools like rolling white boards with red and green cards indicating if a gemba walk has been completed by the scheduled team member. Unfortunately, many of these aides aren't helping these shop floors reach the full potential of their gemba walk.

Although visual cues are used to encourage the walk, there isn't standardized attendance tracking. If there's no accountability for completing the gemba walk, then the activity becomes optional. Oftentimes participants don't have a clear next step in terms of pass the baton to next. Without follow through, the observations and recommendations won't be implemented.

Furthermore, tracking and reviewing the notes and frequency of the gemba empowers your team to review the gemba walk's value and challenges. Review notes to see if specific employees, production lines, or times of year are more likely to yield negative, positive, or indifferent results.

Shops focused on continuous improvement tend to be insight and data-driven. However, without standardizing, collecting, and converting your data into a usable format, gleaning these insights is impossible.

Tulip's flexible and intuitive manufacturing app platform helps manufacturers create applications that guide operators and collect data from the people, machines, and processes involved in production. With Tulip, companies can digitally transform their shop floors and gain real-time visibility of their production in days.

Try implementing the recommendations above using our [Gemba Walk app template](#) during a **30-day free trial!**