

Meet the People, Touch the Parts!

Picture a Production Manager of a business named John. At the end of each week he sits down with all the Managers to go through the sites Key Performance Indicators. He presents the results and discusses which indicators are on target and which are not. The question from the General Manager is as follows: "John, it seems that the productivity in your area has been trending down for the last three weeks. Why is this happening?" John shifts uncomfortably in his seat and loosens his collar, "Well.....ah.....there have been some attendance issues and some of the new staff areum.....not as skilled as they could be."

The plain truth is that "John" isn't at all sure why productivity in his area is down. He has been busy on numerous projects and was confident that his assistant manager was maintaining the performance of the business unit. Not an uncommon scenario and one that is replicated in many different industries. The basic assumption is made that if you promote the right people and pay them well then you shouldn't have to micro-manage each process.



Regarding this assumption I would pose the following questions:

- How well do you understand the processes of which you are in charge?
- What systems support these processes and how well are they functioning?
- Do the people who report to you understand the business direction and have the required motivation to support it?

These questions lead us to the importance of managers going to the Shopfloor and understanding what is happening. Most commonly known as the "**Gemba Walk**" these routine actions can be so critical to the business.

Gemba is a Japanese word meaning; "**The place where the work occurs**" or in business terms can be translated into; "**The place where value is created.**"



Management Philosophy

The management philosophy underpinning the gemba walk concept is that the good manager does not just sit at his desk, answer phone calls and attend meetings. The good manager understands their department intimately down to the level of the key processes within it. He or she does this by routinely going to the 'gemba'.

As it is said by Michael & Freddy Balle in *'The Lean Manager'*:

"No matter how pressing all the other issues

*To practice lean management, you need to **wash your hands three times a day.***

***Meet the people, touch the parts** It all happens at the Gemba*

*the secret of lean leadership is no secret at all: **Go and see. Ask 'Why?' Show respect.**"*

To undertake a gemba walk is to truly get in touch with the processes, systems and people in your area of responsibility. You should "**observe the production floor without preconceptions** and with a blank mind. Repeat 'why' five times to every matter" (Taiichi Ohno). The gemba walk is not meant to be a random exercise you do only when you have a spare half hour, it is a routine that you should build into each week that has a specific purpose. This purpose can be described as:

1. Understanding how well the systems and processes are functioning within your area of responsibility;
2. Gaining a better understanding of the problems that your personnel are tackling and if they are able to solve those problems; and
3. Building the level of engagement people have with you and each other.

My own mentor at a well known car company would ask me: "How do you know if the workplace condition is normal or abnormal?"

Like our Production Manager "John" we could wait until the end of the week or end of the month to see if the data showed an 'abnormal' situation occurring, or we could regularly schedule in time to 'go to the gemba' and see (or ask) first-hand whether small problems were accumulating.

Making the most of your Walk

So if the gemba walk is an assessment at the basic level of your business then what do you do about the problems that you observe? The answer depends on the level of problem that you see.

If the problems are mainly at the process level, that is, the people performing the work are having difficulty following a process. The possible follow-up could be to clarify with their direct supervisor or team leader how recently the process standard was reviewed.



If the problems are more at the system level, for example the IT system does not support an efficient workflow then your role would be to ensure the appropriate system owners align the system to support the best workflow.

As well as looking at systems and processes, the gemba walk is your chance to engage with your staff and genuinely thank them for their good work. This doesn't mean a 20 minute chat with every person! There is a skill in commencing a conversation with an open question. "How are you today?" then asking more specifically: "how is the new project coming along?" and then finally closing with: "Thanks and great work."

In the Harvard Business Review article '*Decoding the DNA of the Toyota Production System*', Steven Spear and H. Kent Bowen described how a supervisor teaching a person the principles of Lean would come to the work site while the person was working and ask a series of questions:

- How do you do this work?
- How do you know you are doing this work correctly?
- How do you know that the outcome is free of defects?
- What do you do if you have a problem?

Best plan of Action

As a process itself the gemba walk should be at similar times of day or a similar time each week so that there is no element of surprise in the activity. Items that you have discussed on the previous gemba walk need to be followed up the next time you come around. A note pad comes in handy to write down actions, follow-ups and feedback.

We go back to "John" the Production Manager at the next week's KPI meeting. He sits down to go through the month end results. Productivity is showing a positive trend. He understands the root causes of the specific issues and has followed up weekly to ensure a better result. All other indicators are either positive or trending toward positive territory. He explains each indicator in turn, what he sees as the key issues and solutions as well as the specific activity which is resulting in the improved performance. The General Manager has no questions.

For more information about CTPM's approach to introducing the Gemba Walk at your site please contact your CTPM Navigator or CTPM Head Office on +61 4226 6184 or email ctpm@ctpm.org.au.