

Workflow: Operational Guidance and Execution

Toolkit 3.8

Gemba Walks

target audience

Managers.

what it is

Gemba is a Japanese term for “the real place”, i.e., the place where the action is, or where the real work happens, and where the value is added. In short, it is where a team is engaged in its main purpose. A “Gemba Walk” is an event and an opportunity for executives/managers to go to where the real work happens and approach the people and the activity with a fresh pair of eyes.

You may say that you walk the packhouse and packing lines daily, but with what intention? To control, to instruct, to correct, to learn, to listen, to understand, to coach, to build relationships and trust? It is likely that you are walking the packhouse and interacting with teams in the same way you have done for years. Gemba walks provide an opportunity to raise the bar and achieving greater team effectiveness, autonomy, and results.

why it is important

Continuous improvement is manager lead, but team owned.

A Gemba walk is a good way to work with your teams, learning from each other, and indirectly communicating that you expect much more from them as “specialists” in what they do and aim to perfect daily.

The approach is also quite different from typical instructive and controlling behaviour. In a Gemba walk the approach is interrogative (questioning), analytical, and collaborative, rather than result-focused; and is aimed at fixing the problem together rather than fixing the blame.

Finally, continuous improvement only happens when teams are empowered. Gemba walks are an intentional way in building competent, thinking, confident, and autonomous teams.

success factors

There are three components to a Gemba walk:

1. **Go and See** – The main idea of the Gemba walk is for managers and leaders on every level to take regular walks around the packhouse and to be involved in finding wasteful activities.

2. **Ask Why** – A Gemba walk's main objective is to explore the value stream in detail and locate its problematic parts through active communication. A good leader is always eager to listen rather than talk. Here is why you may use different techniques such as the 5 Whys in order to identify problematic parts of the process.
3. **Respect People** – Keep in mind that a Gemba walk is not a "boss walk". Pointing fingers and blaming people is exactly what you should not do. You are not there to judge and review results. You are there to collaborate with the team and find and solve problems together. Try to focus on finding the weak spots of the process, not of the people.

execution steps

7 Steps to Follow When you Go to Gemba

Before you walk the packhouse, you need to create a plan and follow the steps, otherwise it will be inefficient. The plan should depend on your goals and objectives.

The basic steps are:

1. **Pick a theme** – When you go to Gemba, you have to choose a theme. This will help you focus all your efforts and be effective. There are different themes you may want to explore, such as a specific farming practice, quality, safety etc. In order to be as precise as possible, prepare a list of questions you are going to ask.
2. **Prepare your team** – The team that will be observed should be prepared for what is going to happen. All team members need to have a clear understanding that the Gemba walk is a common process where the final destination is continuous improvement. This way, workers will feel much more comfortable and willing to collaborate.
3. **Focus on the process, not on people** – You need to remember that a Gemba walk is not the right time to evaluate your team's performance. The main purpose is to observe, understand, and improve the process. If you focus on people's personal abilities, you will only face resistance.
4. **Focus on the value adding activities** – Focusing on the value adding activities will give you the best opportunities to identify areas with a high potential for waste (time, effort, materials). Eliminating those activities will help you improve your overall performance.
5. **Record your observations. Do not make suggestions during the walk** – Write down everything that grabs your attention or even record it with your smartphone. In some cases, you will probably be tempted to offer a solution immediately, but this would be wrong. Leave the analysis for later. You will be much more precise after you have all the facts available. Furthermore, the broad overview can offer you opportunities to use effective problem-solving tools. This is more effective than an instant gut feeling.
6. **An extra pair of eyes** – It may be a good idea to invite a colleague from another department, preferably someone with totally different daily tasks. People who are less familiar with the processes usually have a fresh perspective and ask different questions that you may never think to ask.
7. **Follow-up** – Even if you do not find anything significant during your Gemba walk, you need to share with the team what you have learned or seen. Otherwise, the team will only have the feeling of being watched. If you are going to take action after the walk, inform the team about the upcoming changes and why they are necessary.

assessment questions

Please Note: There is no minimum / maximum number of questions you can add.

1.	Do you walk the packhouse at least twice (tbc) per week?
2.	Do you decide on a specific purpose for your walk, i.e., an area of the operation, a specific team, an area of concern?
3.	Have you introduced the concept and practice of the Gemba walk to your teams?
4.	Do you conduct the Gemba walk effectively, i.e., using the correct open, questioning, and collaborative approach?
5.	Do you make notes during your Gemba walk, think about them and work with the team later to embed more permanent solutions to problems?
6.	Are you starting to save time and effort because your teams are increasingly autonomous and are able to solve problems at the right level?

resources

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| 1. | <i>Gemba Walk: Where the Real Work Happens</i> |
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