

A new way to think about **Gemba Walks**

Look

Listen

Learn



Whats in a name?

I have been discussing the power of Gemba walks with several organisations and realised that there is a danger that these have become just another tool. There seems to be a tendency to set targets for managers to do “x” number of walks without any really focus on the purpose or the quality.

The better organisations are training managers in what a Gemba walk is and how to do one but whilst it’s important to understand this the most critical place to start is why do them at all. In other words let’s be clear on the purpose before we jump into the activity.

The purpose is not the walk itself but rather what we see and hear on the walk and what we learn from our observations. I suggested to one organisation that they amend their training and teach them as Look, Listen and Learn walks.

Walkers were encouraged to think about :

- what am I seeing here?
- what am I hearing (actively listening) ?
- and what have a learned from the experience ?

The effect was quite dramatic resulting in leaders and managers actively thinking about what they were trying to achieve. Significantly it also resulted in a commitment to take actions about what they had learned. It is important for leaders to reflect and consider what they have learned about themselves. For example some useful questions to reflect on could be :

- have I provided clarity on the business / team purpose?
- have I encouraged and supported the ideal behaviours ?
- have I ensured that people are given systems and training that help them to be successful?

A GOOD LOOK, LISTEN AND LEARN WALK SHOULD BE USED AS AN OPPORTUNITY TO GET FEEDBACK AND UNDERSTAND WHAT THE WALKER PERSONALLY NEEDS TO CHANGE AS A LEADER.

The Purpose

BEFORE STARTING ANY WALK ALWAYS PAUSE AND ASK “WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THIS WALK?”

There are many reasons for doing a Gemba walk: for example to review improvement activity, to see if people are being communicated with in an effective way, or see how behaviours are being managed.

Listed in Table 1 below (a development of David Mann’s thinking) is a summary of the types of thing that you should be able to see on the walk, as well as what the people you talk to could be expected to know.

Examples of types of Gemba walk themes developed from an original concept from David Mann

Extracted from *Essence of Excellence* p141-142

Walk Focus	What you should see	What people should know
<p>Communication</p>	<p>Daily shift meeting agenda visible on the team info centre</p> <p>Where applicable, info from other shifts is displayed</p> <p>Meetings happen at all management levels</p>	<p>How often does your team meet as a group?</p> <p>Is it a regularly scheduled meetings or just once in a while?</p> <p>How do you know what topics you’ll cover in any given day’s start-up meeting?</p> <p>Do you lead or attend any daily meetings?</p> <p>What are they?</p>
<p>Behaviours</p>	<p>A current list of behavioural norms for the business</p> <p>A current list of specific behaviours for team members, team managers and manager</p> <p>A method of recognising these behaviours</p> <p>A method of improving behaviours where there are gaps</p>	<p>What are the behavioural norms used in this business?</p> <p>What are the specific behaviours that you have developed in this team?</p> <p>How are they assessed?</p> <p>What happens if they are applied?</p> <p>What happens if they are not?</p>

The *What*

Gemba walks are a checking process that leads to greater understanding and are, therefore, the foundation for further learning, development and improvement. Not just of the people met on the walk but also of the walker themselves.

They help distinguish between 'the process' and 'the people'. But they are not about checking the people. To do correctly they require humility- for example a leader checking if people understand the company goals should be checking the effectiveness of the deployment system not the person they are talking to. They are in effect learning about the effectiveness of a particular system from the person who is a participant in it.

Not so much are targets being met but what support do people need to help achieve those targets.

We need to look at what's happening and listen to what people are saying both to us and to each other.

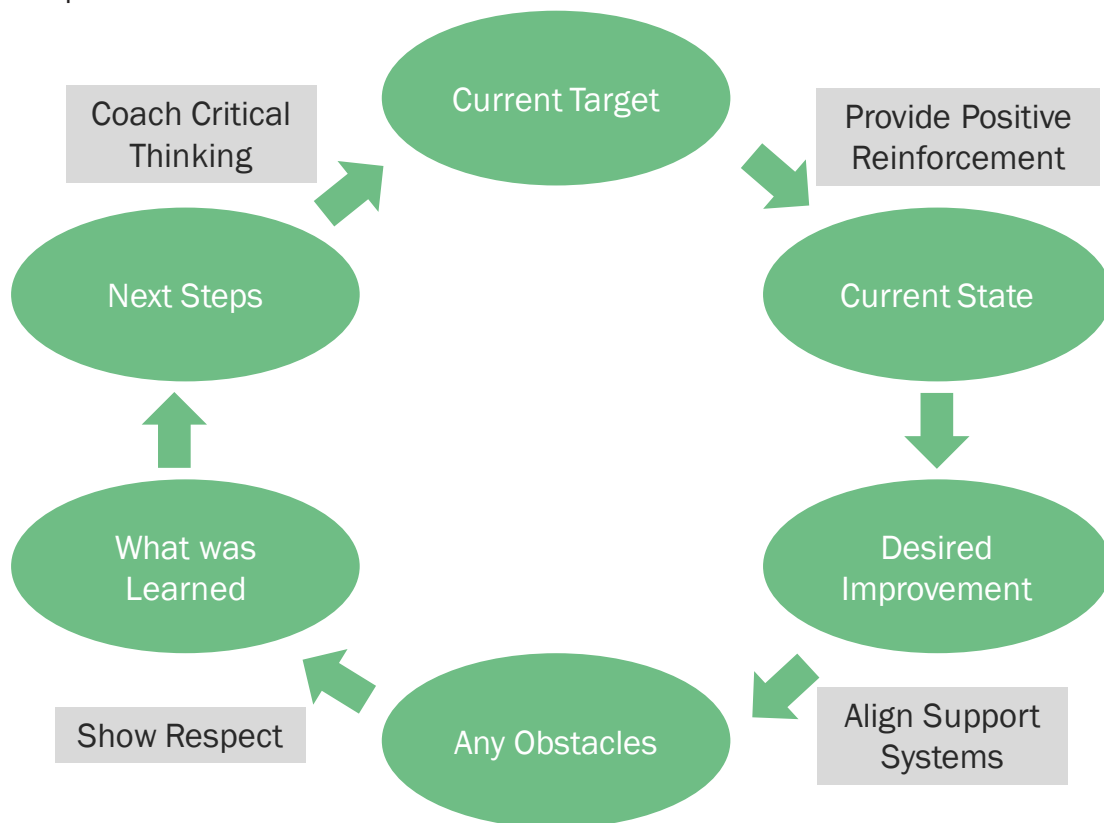
Typical things we want to learn could include for example :

- Do people understand the business priorities ?
- Do people feel they get the support they need to achieve their targets ?
- Are people skilled in how to solve problems in a structured way that addresses the root cause ?

If this approach is taken then the walker will understand the current target and current state for the topic under review. They then discuss the desired improvement, any specific obstacles, what has been learned and what the next steps are.

This then allows for appropriate coaching conversations about how to reach the target state and whether this target should be extended.

Also it should be followed by personal reflection time on what changes the walker might need to make personally to the ways of working, leadership style and preconceptions.



The walks provide a way to help understand why the existing process may not be capable enough and help people understand that they are not to blame. It is about asking yourself the 5 whys, not the 5 whos.

What Gemba walks provide is the opportunity to learn first hand what is really happening in the workplace.

- Are people living and breathing the organisations ideal behaviours ?
- Are our systems making it easy to do the job in the right way or not ?

Source
How to do a Gemba Walk
Michael Bremer, 2016

The high level process can be described as a six-step approach (Bremer, 2016) as illustrated here.



The *How*

I often hear, “we do gemba walks – I visit the shop floor every day”.

Whilst this is a good first step it does not mean that there is an effective Look, Listen and Learn process in place. Unfortunately, the activity can be driven by the wrong metric such as a target of how many walks each manager must do without any qualitative check on their effectiveness.

In these scenarios people are essentially using a tool but risk undermining its effectiveness and credibility.

Consider this example

A senior manager has decided to do a weekly gemba walk to the shop floor. He visits a local team leader and notices that the team board has a lot of ‘red ink’. Many of the KPIs are below target and most of the projects are behind. Without delay, he starts angrily shouting at the team leader about what a poor job he is doing and that when he comes back next week he expects to see no ‘red ink’, with all targets being met and projects up to date.

The whole exchange takes no more than five minutes. The likely short-term effect is a highly demotivated individual who may well pass this sentiment on to his team. The longer-term effect is that problems will be hidden, so the chances of improvement are low.

Having learned from his mistake, the senior manager visits another team the week after and finds a similar amount of ‘red ink’ on the board. Instead of shouting, he calls the second team leader over and conducts a ten-minute monologue about what the biggest problems are, what needs to be done and exactly how to go about it in the period before he visits again in a week’s time.

Again, if we consider the consequences, in the short term there may well be some work undertaken by the team leader and team, but it is likely to be half-hearted, poorly executed and unlikely to be sustained, as it was not their idea, may not address their issues and was conveyed in an authoritative way. The longer-term effect is equally poor as the team leader has been taught not to think for himself and even if he does, he won’t be allowed to implement his ideas. The result is slow improvement, with generally suboptimal results and poor sustainability.

LOOK, LISTEN AND LEARN IS A USEFUL WAY TO REMIND ONESELF OF BOTH THE WHY AND HOW TO UNDERTAKE A GEMBA WALK. IT IS SOMETHING THAT TAKES A LOT OF PRACTICE AND IT'S IMPOSSIBLE TO GET RIGHT AT THE FIRST ATTEMPT.

A week later, the senior manager has a third attempt, this time taking a very different approach. He visits another team leader with the same 'red ink' scenario. He starts by asking how things are going and what the major two or three issues seem to be. The team leader responds by talking through three areas.

The senior manager takes one of these – the area that due to his experience he considers the most pressing – and asks what the team leader thinks might be done about it. The team leader responds with a few ideas. The senior manager picks up on the first one and they proceed to discuss how this might be done.

At the end of a 30-minute discussion the team leader has a clear plan for his top two projects, what to do and how to do it. The senior manager signs off with a question about whether any more support is needed. The short-term result is that the team leader goes away all fired up, conveys this enthusiasm to the team and rapid progress is made.

The longer-term result is that the team leader has been coached and will have a much better idea of what to do next time, and may also start to adopt a similar approach with their own team.

So, three quite different results, all from a Gemba walk. However, the three approaches need an increasingly long time for the conversation, at least the first time around. Although many of us know that the latter will produce the best result, we don't do it that way as we don't have time. The moral is if we don't make time we never will have time, because we will be firefighting the problems caused by the first two scenarios. So the style of leader standard work is as important as the content.

Mann notes that 'Gemba walking, traditionally focused on the technical side of Lean (is inventory being pushed or pulled; is standard work balanced to takt?), is indispensable in learning lean management and especially in maintaining it'. However, we believe that it is as, or more, important to check the behaviours of teams and their leaders as it is their projects and results. Of course, this is much easier to do if you have a good behavioural & strategy deployment system in operation and this is described in detail in Chapter 3 of the Essence of Excellence book.





In the book 4+1 Embedding a Culture of Continuous Improvement the authors suggest that there are three levels of maturity that organisations go through in the adoption of Gemba walks. A high level summary of these levels is given below and these are expanded upon in detail in Chapter 5 of the book.



Beginner

The organisation has recognised that “Gemba” walks are important and set a clear expectation that leaders at all levels should do them.



Intermediate

Leaders have been trained in how to do Gemba walks and they are recognised as an integral element of the System of Improvement and the System of Thinking and Behaviour. Key Behaviour Indicators are being experimented with.



Advanced

Gemba walks are regularly reviewed for effectiveness with leaders honing their skills in shared lessons learned reviews. They are part of all leader’s standard work and valued by both leaders and employees across the organisation. Key behaviour indicators are well established and in place to measure and track effectiveness.

Summary

Look. Listen and Learn (Gemba) walks are an essential element to sustaining a culture of Continuous improvement and undertaken correctly will support the development of leaders , managers and colleagues at all levels. Some key takeaways to reflect on are given below :

- Gemba walks are a process of discovery ... have an open mind and maintain curiosity throughout. It is never about validating preconceptions, but rather discovering what is going on.
- Prepare ahead so that you concentrate on observation. Be clear on the purpose of the activity and what you want to learn. Reflect on what you have learned about yourself.
- Maintain respect for those working on the process who understand it best. Engage people by directly listening and seeing. Always resist the temptation to jump in with the answers.
- It’s ok to start off basic then build up the maturity and effectiveness of the Gemba walks over time

This article is largely extracted from 2 Shingo award winning publications “The Essence of Excellence” (Hines and Butterworth 2019) and “ Embedding a Culture of Continuous Improvement in Financial Services” 2nd Edition 2018 Jones, Butterworth, Harder)

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