



article



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Why a gemba walk is like going to ‘the scene of the crime’

By Emeritus Professor Norman Faull, Founder and Chairman of the Lean Institute Africa

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Gemba, Heijunka, Jidoka, Kaikaku, Kanban, Muda, Poka-yoke. At a meeting, Lean Global Network affiliates discussed the pros and cons of using Japanese terms when introducing people to Lean and Toyota Production System (TPS) principles. ‘Gemba’ was the only one of these terms they supported for general use. In this article, Norman Faull discusses what a ‘gemba walk’ is and how it differs from Management By Walking Around.

‘Gemba’ is a word that I’ve always explained as ‘where the actual work takes place.’ While writing this article, I looked for other translations of the word and found several. In Toyota Culture, Liker and Hoseus define it as ‘where the work is done’, the Lean Lexicon (an LEI publication available through www.lean.org) terms it ‘actual workplace’ and Wikipedia calls it ‘the real place’.

On a visit to Cape Town, John Shook, renowned Lean specialist and CEO of the Lean Enterprise Institute, added a whole new dimension to my understanding of the word ‘gemba’. John worked for Toyota for 11 years, five of them in Japan, and is fluent in Japanese. He says in Japan, ‘gemba’ is commonly understood to mean ‘the scene of the crime’. So a manager doing a gemba walk is going to the ‘scene of the crime’, to the specific place where problems are experienced; it is not a ‘courtesy call’ with the general shop floor.



Takeyuki Furuhashi, my Japanese sensei, told me how Taiichi Ohno, the creator of the Toyota Production System, would demand that his factory-based managers spend their time at the gemba. But they were very intimidated by him and would post a look-out for his approach to the plant; on the signal that he was arriving, they would scatter from their offices into the plant. He would then battle to find them, which was of course their aim; when he did and would scold them, they would claim that they were simply following his instructions by being in the gemba.

So Ohno devised a new injunction: *genchi genbutsu*. Furuhashi-san tells me this means 'go to the actual site where the problem is being experienced.' So it is the injunction to do a gemba walk! Liker and Meier define *genchi genbutsu* as 'going to the actual place' (*Toyota Talent*, 2007) but Liker and Hoseus explain it more fully as 'going to the source to find the facts to make correct decisions, build consensus, and achieve goals at our best speed.' (*Toyota Culture*, 2008)

Remember the exhortations for Management By Walking Around (MBWA)? Contrast the gemba walk idea with this definition of MBWA: 'Unstructured approach to hands-on, direct participation by the managers in the work-related affairs of their subordinates, in contrast to rigid and distant management. In MBWA practice, managers spend a significant amount of their time making informal visits to the work area and listening to employees. The purpose of this exercise is to collect qualitative information, listen to suggestions and complaints, and keep a finger on the pulse of the organisation. It is also called management by wandering around.' — www.businessdictionary.com

In Japan, 'gemba' is commonly understood to mean 'the scene of the crime.'



Clearly, gemba walks are about as far removed from MBWA as a detective visiting a crime scene is from the same detective doing a courtesy call on a friend. This is also aptly illustrated in the book *Gemba Walks* by Jim Womack. With an overview of tools and theory told through stories and explorations of real events, *Gemba Walks* invites readers to tackle problems on an immediate and personal level. In so doing, it gives courage for beginners to get started and for veterans to keep going.



BIOGRAPHY



Norman Faull is the Founder and Chairman of the Lean Institute Africa (LIA), a not-for-profit company and member of the Lean Global Network. It promotes the effective use of lean in improving competitiveness and service delivery across many industries.

In his academic career, he was Emeritus Professor of Operations Management at the Graduate School of Business, University of Cape Town. He conducted research and taught Operations Management, Operations Strategy, Supply Chain Management and Operations Strategy Implementation locally and internationally.

Norman was among the first group of researchers in South Africa to introduce innovative manufacturing and supply chain efficiency concepts, such as lean manufacturing, into the country. These concepts continue to play an important role in South Africa and throughout the world.

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