



A simple but proven way to learn more about the work is a Waste Walk or by “going to gemba.” This newsletter explains the concept further, and also addresses common misconceptions about Waste Walks, which can (and should!) be conducted in any work environment. More importantly, the practice can bring about a wide range of significant benefits, including increases in productivity and team engagement. After all, it is only when we truly understand the work that we can make breakthrough improvements.

Bill Conway often said,

“All of the waste comes from the work...what we work on and how we do that work. To improve it, we need to get closer to the work.”

Mary Jane Conway-King

Going to Gemba...Waste Walk

by: Paul Donehue, Senior Associate

As you may know, “Genba,” which has been popularized as “Gemba,” is a Japanese word meaning “the real place.” The word is widely used in Japan, where detectives frequently refer to a crime scene as genba, and Japanese TV reporters often refer to themselves as reporting from genba/gemba.

In the business realm, gemba refers to the place where work is done and value created; in manufacturing the gemba is typically the factory floor, but looking further afield it can be any location – a construction site, administrative office, or sales bullpen – where the actual work is being done. When it comes to Continuous Improvement, problems are most visible in these areas, and the best improvement ideas will come from going to gemba. There is no substitute for ‘going to the work’ and there are things that can only be learned by going there and watching the work with a purpose.

Thus a gemba walk, or Waste Walk, is an activity that takes management and other stakeholders to the front lines to look for waste and opportunities for improvement; to observe the work where the work is being done, and to identify what goes wrong or could go wrong, how often it does or could go wrong, and the associated consequences. The Waste Walk is designed to help everyone understand the value stream and its problems; it is not to review results and make superficial comments.

Where and How Can Waste Walks Be Most Effectively Executed?

In many organizations, gemba or Waste Walk efforts-to-date have primarily or exclusively taken place in manufacturing, warehouse or shop-floor environments.

For example, during one Waste Walk in a manufacturing area, those involved focused on process constraints, and identified several bottlenecks and, ultimately, solutions that increased overall capacity; in another similar setting the gemba team was able to separate value added work from that which was non-value added, and then created data images to document the changes they believed would maximize the former and eliminate the latter. In one manufacturing location, the gemba team pre-selects a theme each month such as safety or process inefficiencies, and during the walk they search for activities or process steps that impact the theme.

However, while Waste Walks are most often put into practice within the above mentioned areas, all



environments should be considered. A supply chain management company used Waste Walks as a way of solving a recurring order-processing problem that had become a hot issue with one of their mid-sized customer locations. They involved a number of their team members, including representatives from management, customer service and their CI group. It worked out so well that they now do Waste Walks at customer sites on a regular basis. Not only do the teams solve problems and make design changes in ways that benefit both parties, but their relationships with these customers have also grown significantly, which has boosted revenue and customer retention. Based on the success of gemba or Waste Walks at customer locations, the company has recently started conducting them with suppliers, and anticipates similar positive results.

Some companies send their employees to observe how their customers use their products and the ‘pain’ (complexities, errors, troubles) that the products cause the customers. Having done that, the employees are able to go back to their own gemba and see more opportunities for Improvement.

In the retail sector, one company conducted a series of Waste Walks during their inventory season, watching and documenting the process at different stores. As one might expect, performance levels varied from location to location; and while some best-practices were certainly documented during the Waste Walks at the top performing sites, the greatest gains were made during Waste Walks at the stores in which performance was traditionally mediocre, where, as a result of the initiative, average cycle time was cut in half.

Waste Walks are used less frequently in areas where the work is “less visible,” such as administrative offices, purchasing departments, and R&D labs. When the work is less visible, the Waste Walk team needs to ask many more questions of the people doing the work in order to learn what they are doing and to gain valuable insights.

Who Should Be Involved?

In principle anyone who’s willing to walk and learn, and who can add valid perspective should be involved at one time or another.

More specifically, the ideal “internal” gemba team may consist of those who do the work as well as the Director of Operations and/or Unit Manager, a Continuous Improvement leader, key operators, and an industrial engineer. Each team should also appoint a facilitator and a scribe.

Some organizations often include people from other parts of the organization because they have a tendency to look beyond the problems and suggest solutions that those closest to the work might not have considered. Sometimes, it is much easier to think outside of the box when one is from outside of the box!

Including “external” auditors and/or consultants can generate fresh and useful ideas, as these people tend to think differently and raise different types of questions that challenge the status-quo. Involving customers and suppliers is a great way to add focus on what is truly value-added.

A Frequently Asked Question...

People often think Waste Walks are similar to the concept of Management by Walking Around (MBWA), which was made famous by Hewlett Packard decades ago.

While each activity is aimed at improving outcomes, the two types of “walks” are quite different.

Gemba or Waste Walks are all about identifying opportunities for improving work and work processes; they take place where the work is being done and involve interaction among a number of people.

MBWA, on the other hand, is generally a less-structured approach to hands-on, direct participation by a manager in the work-related affairs of subordinates; it can take place in virtually any setting and most often involves more casual communication between a manager and an individual team member.

Here is what Dr. Deming said about MBWA, “Management By Walking Around is hardly ever effective. The reason is that someone in management, walking around, has little idea about what questions to ask, and usually does not pause long enough at any spot to get the right answer.”

—W. Edwards Deming, Out of the Crisis, 1982



Other Key Benefits

Almost everyone can agree that going to gemba – that is, to where the work is being done – is a highly-effective way of surfacing waste and process flaws, and of discovering how to best go about identifying lasting solutions. A key ingredient for any successful Waste Walk is amnesty and having the right mindset about the objective. The Waste Walk is not about finding fault – it is about learning. Before embarking on a Waste Walk, consider what the people ‘on the line’ will feel like as the group observes the work and asks questions.

Aside from the specific gains made during each of the Waste Walks, there are higher-level benefits associated with the practice:

Engagement

Since people at all levels are involved, and since the Waste Walks have proved to be an effective method of detecting hard-to-identify problems as well as solutions which improve both productivity and day-to-day quality of work life, a noticeable increase in workforce engagement is a common by-product.

People like it when problems they have known about for a long time are finally solved, and the many questions that each Waste Walk brings about also promote ideas for Improvement to which the workforce more readily buys-in.

Trust

Company leaders are able to establish greater levels of trust with the people closest to the work, by showing interest and seeking the opinions and input of those doing the work.

Learn the Truth

Going to gemba enables leaders to identify reality versus what they think (or hope) is happening. Waste Walks help leaders to question their assumptions.

Better Ideas

When the people who are doing the work or executing the process every day start talking, thinking and feeling empowered, the ideas really flow...

Ask the Right Questions

Getting the data and seeing it for the first time based on direct observation is powerful; and then if you can get customers, suppliers and company personnel working through the chain, the types of questions that surface promote more innovative and accurate solutions.

Improvement vs. Habit-forming Execution

The combination of fresh eyes, diverse perspective, amnesty, and a collective, sincere interest to eliminate waste and continually improve the work process tends to bring about real, often outside-of-the-box solutions; true Improvement versus doing things the same way.

Best Practices and Tips for Successful Implementation

Here is a summary of the steps and methodology for implementing Waste Walks that have proved successful in organizations and that have brought-about the robust list of benefits above.

One of the most important elements is communication – before, during and after the Waste Walk:



- Communicate before starting. Begin by breaking the ice with the people in the work area so they know what is happening and why; make it clear that this is not a fault-finding mission, that there is amnesty, and that the Waste Walk is an effort to “help, not to shoot the wounded.”
- Communicate with the gemba team. Establish ground rules, making sure to describe the theme or the forms of waste the team will be targeting, along with any other expectations relative to objectives, people issues, desired outcomes, and so on.
- Describe the start and end points of what you want to observe and study.
- Conduct the Waste Walk and maintain communication protocols throughout; remind the team that as they interact with and pose questions to those doing the work, they must listen carefully to the answers.
- Reconvene in a meeting room afterward to record ideas, consider what the team has learned, set priorities, and move into action! Sometimes it gets harder as the team disperses, so be sure to maintain communication and measure progress after-the-fact.
- Be inquisitive...curious...
- Make Waste Walks a regular part of people’s work; they should not happen once in a blue moon

Consider the Guiding Principle in a Waste Walk...

The mantra in a Waste Walk is NOT: "Don't just stand there; do something!" It is:

"Don't just do something; stand there and learn!"