

July 18, 2012

Wednesday's Words of Quality

Rewalking the Gemba Walk with Dr. Liker

Dr. Jeffrey Liker took the time to respond to the previous Wednesday's Words of Quality on *Gemba Walk*. I had offered a definition of gemba but then provided three more descriptions from other sources that were each a little different. I apologize if this was confusing. I offered up several views with definitions and instructions about what to do when walking the gemba as I thought that you might find these perspectives useful to extrapolate what was pertinent to your domain. There is marked variation in patient care, non-patient care, support functions and research workplace environments that WWQ addresses across the broad spectrum of healthcare settings. I don't know about you, but I'm going with his definition of the gemba walk as described below!

Here is what Professor Liker wrote to me for my edification and now yours.

Richard,

The gemba walk is potentially one of the most confusing aspects of lean. Your managers are not exactly sure where gemba starts and ends, where they should be walking, and what they should be doing when they are walking.

"The word "Gemba" is a Japanese term meaning the real place where value is created and the actual work is done" But more broadly it is where actual activities take place where work is done or products are used (production line, material delivery process, nurses taking blood, doctors analyzing blood test results and explaining to patient).

There are six descriptions of what a manager should do on a gemba walk. In its simplest form the manager should walk within their area of responsibility daily and periodically walk upstream to the "supplier process" and downstream to the "customer process." What should be accomplished on the walk is:

- 1. Manager understanding the current situation.*
- 2. Manager developing a clear picture of what should be happening.*
- 3. Manager noticing gaps between what is happening and what should be happening--the problems.*
- 4. Manager assessing the understanding of the people in the work area of what the problems are--what is compared to what should be.*
- 5. Manager discussing with people in the work area what they see as problems and through questions helping (teaching) to raise their understanding of the key problems and their priorities.*
- 6. Manager finding out how people in the work area are thinking about their jobs, responsibilities, and ways to improve the process to coach them on a better way of thinking and the urgency of daily kaizen.*

In a large area not every area can be covered in one day so the manager must plot out several different patterns and alternate from day to day--perhaps over one week covering the whole work area. Each day pick one area for a deep dive of stopping and watching in detail. If there is an acute problem in an area that should obviously become an immediate focus.

More senior managers should also be doing this but their job is to coach the managers to check what they are observing and how they are thinking about process improvements.

The more clear it is in the workplace what the standards are (reflecting what should be) the more easily the manager can see the gaps and have productive discussions with people in the process. If there is a chart it should be clear if the process is in control (green) or out of control (red). It should be clear where inputs used should be, how much should be there, and when they should be arriving. It should be clear (without flipping through many computer screens) what the technical worker should be working on vs what they are working on. This is called a "visual workplace" and the more it is clear visually what should be happening versus what is happening the more productive the gemba walks will be. Note that visual management is often more important for the manager coming to check the process than it is for workers in the process who intimately understand the work.

In the process of these gemba visits there are opportunities to establish trust and destroy trust. Obviously building trust is desired. That requires that the behavior of the manager clearly shows the manager is there to help and collaboratively with the workers improve work life and improve customer responsiveness. As this happens it will be very natural to see the manager walking the process and people will approach the manager with problems asking for help.

The goal is not just sustaining the gains, but more important promoting kaizen and developing people as they participate in kaizen.

Thank you Dr. Liker. It is clear that a Lean management system should foster these expectations of managers and the workforce and that the gemba walk is a tour of the shop with specific tactics and intent that serves to educate those in the gemba to see problems and promote their participation in process improvement. If becoming a better Lean leader and coach is on your personal development plan, I can highly recommend to you his new book, *The Toyota Way to Lean Leadership: Achieving and Sustaining Excellence Through Leadership Development*.