



New Zealand Lean Academy

GETTING STARTED WITH

GEMBA **WALKS**

This resource was developed by the New Zealand Lean Academy where we're on a mission to make Lean Thinking sexy!

This eBook about getting started with Gemba Walks is just a tiny piece of the puzzle. We're building New Zealand's one-stop shop for Lean Thinking tools, templates, and ideas over at www.nzla.nz

Come and join us as we bring Lean Thinking to the people, and help make New Zealand the best place in the world to live and work.





Rob Bull

Co-Founder & CEO of
New Zealand Lean Academy

Good on ya for getting curious about Gemba Walks!

I'm an absolute geek when it comes to Lean Thinking, but holy-crap there's some wordy-jargon that comes with it! So I've worked hard to make this resource accessible and as practical as possible, giving you everything you need to get started with Gemba Walks without having to spend hours watching videos or pouring through books.

When you have questions or need guidance on implementing great Gemba Walks or any other Lean methodologies, don't hesitate to reach out. Together, we can make New Zealand the best place in the world to live and do business.

Let's go!

Rob Bull



www.nzla.nz

“There are three kinds of leaders. Those that tell you what to do. Those that allow you to do what you want. And Lean Leaders that come to where the work is being done and help you figure it out.”

John Shook



Why you're going to love **GEMBA WALKS**

We've all experienced terrible workplaces where the boss is nowhere to be seen until something goes wrong. Every time they pop up, it's tense, there's finger pointing and everyone gets stressed.

Obviously this isn't you or any of the leaders on your team, and when you introduce a habit of regular Gemba Walks, you'll make sure you keep it that way!

The name Gemba (sometimes also spelled genba) is a Japanese term meaning “the actual place” or a more simple translation, where the work is done. Gemba Walks are carefully planned activities where leaders step out of their offices, slow down, and observe the work environment with curiosity.

*Put most simply, you go to where the work is done,
observe, interact and discuss what's happening.*

You'll be amazed by what you notice when you slow down to pay attention to everything that's happening around you. As Gemba Walks become part of your regular practice, you'll find yourself focusing on specific areas and engaging in really robust improvement-focused conversations with team members. You'll identify issues, collaborate on solutions, and ultimately build a culture of trust, respect, and continuous growth.

Gemba Walks are a fantastic tool from the Lean Thinking arsenal for enhancing:

- transparency
- communication
- collaboration
- problem solving
- and most importantly - strong relationships with your team



GEMBA WALKS

Getting Started

The seven key elements that make up successful Gemba Walks:

1. Regular Scheduling:

Dedicate time in your calendar for Gemba Walks. Ideally, 2-3 sessions per week as part of your Leader Standard Work. Consistency is key, so try to schedule them at the same time each week.

2. Planning with Your Team:

Communicate with your team about the purpose, expectations, and timing of Gemba Walks. Transparency and collaboration are vital, so ensure everyone understands that the walks are opportunities for problem solving and growth, not EVER "gotcha" moments.

3. Preparedness:

Bring a notebook and a set of questions to guide your observations. While experience will make this process more natural, preparedness is essential, especially when starting out. Use your notebook to document observations, map out the work area, and maybe even record some spaghetti mapping of staff or resource movement.

4. Observation:

Spend 30-45 minutes in the Gemba, paying close attention to the 8 Wastes and 5S principles. The longer you observe, the more you'll notice. Be patient, and let your curiosity guide you.

5. Engagement:

Ask questions and seek clarification on your observations. Engage team members in discussions about process issues, solutions they've tried, and existing standards. The more real-time information you gather, the better.

6. Documentation:

Summarise the discussions and outcomes of your Gemba Walk, including observations, discoveries, and agreed-upon actions. You could even share these notes with the team for transparency and clarity.

7. Follow-up:

Close the communication loop by following up on agreed-upon actions and sharing any requested information. Update the team on progress during the next stand-up meeting and document actions on the Performance Board, noting who is responsible and when tasks should be completed.



Getting started with Gemba Walks can be exciting, but also, potentially messy. If introduced to the team incorrectly, it's extremely confronting to have someone cruising around with a notebook asking questions while you work!

Really take your time at the planning stage to get clear on why you're doing Gemba Walks and what the benefits could be for you, your team & your business. Then, as with the implementation of any new Lean tool, communication, clarity and transparency with your team is priority number 1.

GEMBA WALKS

Implementation tips:

To help you make the most of your Gemba Walks from the get-go, here are some practical tips, guiding questions, and examples:

Planning and Communication:

I make no apologies about repeating this point over and over again because if you don't nail your communication, your change efforts **will** turn to custard. Be transparent about the purpose, benefits, and expectations surrounding Gemba Walks.

I've already talked about avoiding "gotcha" moments, and this point is crucial. You're not there to catch people doing the wrong thing; you're at the Gemba to become aware of opportunities to improve your **systems and processes**. The goal is **always** to create a safe environment for raising concerns and promoting continuous improvement.

Have some self-coaching questions on your notebook page to keep your observation focused:

Kate's amazing at this part. Here are her favourite questions to ask yourself during a Gemba Walk:

- Can I spot any recurring issues or bottlenecks in the workflow?
- How well do team members seem to understand their roles and responsibilities?
- Are standards being followed, and if not, what could be the root cause?
- What am I genuinely curious about, and how will I find out more about it?



Get input from your team:

Grab a team member to do the Gemba Walk with you, or mingle around the whole team and ask some coaching questions (i.e; questions that you don't already know the answer to). Again, Kate's here to help us with some great questions to ask during your Gemba Walk:

- What improvements have been made lately and what's the impact been?
- What still bugs you about this process?
- What could make this easier for you & the team?
- What are you noticing here that you didn't expect to see?
- What improvements do you think we need to prioritise next?
- What support or resources could I provide that would support the team?

Here are some questions to avoid:

X Why are you doing that? (more confrontational than curious)

X How should this be done? (implies that there's only one 'right' way)

X What's been happening? (too general - you'll get a vague response)

Follow-up:

Going to the Gemba and collecting information about your workplace is Step 1. Step 2 is making sure that you're **doing something** with what you've learned. Hold yourself and the team accountable for any agreed-upon actions as a result of Gemba Walk discussions. Provide updates and check in on progress to maintain trust and foster a culture of continuous improvement.

Have you heard of Ohno's Circle?

This is another Lean Tool that I'm a big fan of. It's similar to a Gemba Walk - but without the team interaction.

When carrying out an Ohno's Circle observation, you stand on one spot on the shop-floor and silently observe. No talking, no moving, you just focus on being fully present and observing what's happening. During your observation you'll make a note of questions that you want to ask the team, and then have your discussions afterwards.

It's a powerful way for you or anyone on your team to really take in the bigger picture of what's happening with your work flow.

GEMBA WALK

Recording sheet

Gemba Walk Focus: 8 Wastes		
Type of Waste	What to look out for	Observation notes
Defects	Quality Issues & small re-work issues that tend to be forgotten once the job is finished.	
Overproduction	Things that are ready before our team or customers need them.	
Waiting	Idle time, people waiting for information, decisions or tools	
Non-Utilised Talent	Low morale, drive or creativity. Sensing that people want to make a call but feel they can't.	
Transportation	Movement of materials or information. Are things crisscrossing all over the place?	
Inventory	Where items are stored. Is it in the right place? How much we have on hand?	
Motion	Excessive turning, lifting, walking, people walking backwards and forwards	
Extra-Processing	Going above and beyond for no real benefit to the team or our customers	

GEMBA WALK

Recording sheet

Gemba Walk Focus: Team Coaching		
	Example questions	Field Notes
Issues and Ideas	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> What improvements have been made lately and what's the impact been? What still bugs you about this process? 	
Goals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> What improvements do you think we need to prioritise next? What's important for us to focus on in the next two weeks? 	
Realities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> What have we already tried? What's worked well before that we could tap into again? 	
Options	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> What could we do to improve this process? What else....? What else? What else? 	
Actions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> What will you experiment with in the next two weeks? What are you curious about? 	
Support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> What questions do you have for me? What could I do to support you and the team with this? 	

Evaluating your **GEMBA WALKS**

'Make it exist first, you can make it good later'

Adam Grant

Creating a better business is a mission with no end point, so to review, evaluate, and continuously improve Gemba Walks, I encourage you to think about the following:

Regular Reflection:

After each Gemba Walk, take time to reflect on your observations, conversations, and the overall process. Consider what went well, what could be improved, and how your presence impacted the team's dynamics. It won't be perfect the first time, or maybe even the 100th time, so make sure regular reviews are a part of every improvement initiative you take on.

Gather Team Feedback:

Get your team involved ask them for input on your Gemba Walks. Encourage them to share their thoughts on the frequency, focus, and effectiveness of your walks. This feedback will help you refine your approach so everyone benefits.

Assess Impact on Key Performance Indicators (KPIs):

Here's one for the real data geeks: Analyse relevant KPIs to measure the impact of Gemba Walks on team performance, productivity, and overall efficiency. As one of the Lean Gurus Peter Drucker say's; If you can't measure it, you can't improve it.

Maintain Open Communication:

Encourage ongoing dialogue with your team about the purpose and value of Gemba Walks. Remind them that these walks are opportunities for the improvement of systems and processes, not ever evaluations of individual performance.

Lead by Example:

Continuously demonstrate your commitment to improvement by actively engaging in the process, following through on agreed-upon actions, and sharing your own learnings and challenges with the team.





GEMBA WALKS

Getting Creative with Kate

The only 'right' way to practice Lean Thinking, is the way that's right for you.

You've got the foundations of Gemba Walks covered, now let's look at how we could sprinkle a bit of creativity into this process **if** you want to do something a bit different with it.

Whose job is it anyway?

Why should leaders get all the fun? Even your most junior employees can lead a Gemba Walk observation and conversation. Just brainstorm some standard focus areas or conversation questions together first to guide the process.

Tap into some tech

One of the extraordinary benefits of doing a Gemba Walk is that it gives you a helicopter view of what's going on from the outside in. When you're observing (as opposed to doing) the work, you notice things that you'd simply never see when you're on the tools. Taking a 5 minute video at the Gemba can be an incredible resource to review as a team, or as a powerful self-reflection tool for individuals who are willing to be curious about the way things are happening.

Flip the focus

The Lean purists will tell you that a Gemba Walk is always about observing the systems and processes, not the people. While that's very important when you're starting out; once people on your team are familiar with Gemba Walks and they trust that it's about creating awareness of what's happening, not judging what's happening, then why not play with it? Doing a Gemba Walk with a team member could absolutely be used as part of your staff review process. Just throw in a few targeted questions to prompt self-reflection like: What do you notice about **your** own workflow? What could **you** do differently? What could make **you** more successful in your role?

As always, respecting people through transparency is key - we need to make sure that your colleagues are fully aware of the purpose of the Gemba Walk and what the information collected will be used for.

FINAL THOUGHTS



We absolutely love Gemba Walks and hope that you'll give them a go. By dedicating time to observe, question, and learn from your team members in their work environment, you gain such valuable insights, identify opportunities, and drive the positive change you're looking for.

*The most important thing we want to hammer home:
it's crucial to approach Gemba Walks with
transparency, and a commitment to **follow through** on
whatever it is that you say you'll do.*

When you give Gemba Walks a go and nail them, let us know.

You're awesome & you're doing a great job.

We recommend
checking out these
NZLA resources next:

Leader Standard Work

8 Wastes of Lean

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