

Gemba: The real place

by BRIAN LOCKHART

Have you ever looked at photos of some far-away tropical beach, or a mountain vista with the peaks mystically pushing out from low-lying clouds, and thought, wow, I'd like to see that in person?

Photographs are a great way of showing others some far-flung places on the planet, but a photograph doesn't give the experience of actually being there.

A photograph doesn't provide the experience of feeling the sand underneath your feet or the thrilling fear of doing a loop on a roller coaster if you're just looking at a picture.

Being there, and experiencing it, makes all the difference in the world.

Gemba, is a word that originated in Japan, apparently from executives at Toyota, that refers to the experience of actually being at a place.

Gemba means, 'the real place' or 'the actual place.'

The word has become part of the Japanese lexicon and is used mainly by different professions who use it to describe the fact that they are there and part of the action.

It has become a popular phrase for Japanese TV reporters who may refer to themselves as 'reporting from gemba.' It is their way of telling their audience that they are there, on site, at a news story, not just repeating information phoned in by someone else.

Some of the best news stories and photos in history were made by reporters who waited around at an event after other reporters got a quick photo and packed up their gear and left instead of waiting to see what might happen. Those guys were probably kicking themselves later when their contemporary received a Pulitzer Prize for a photo that was taken because he did spend an extra half-hour at the location and got the photo of a lifetime.

The gemba concept originated in the manufacturing world. They realized that an executive sitting behind a desk on the tenth floor does not really understand the concept of everything that is going on during production.

They started making the executives go out on the production floor, interact with those people operating the machines, and learn the entire process that goes into manufacturing their product.

This concept made a huge difference when making company decisions.

Keeping on top of new developments in the workplace is a huge part of keeping current, increasing production, and staying up to date so you can compete with other industry competitors.

The idea of 'we've always done it that way', means sooner or later those outdated methods will allow a company to fall behind.

I don't know much about the accounting world, but I did know a guy who graduated from university and got a job at a local accounting firm. The company had been around for years and was still run by the same guys who started it.

The new accountant was stunned that they were still using outdated methods from the 1950s. He made some suggestions that would move the company ahead by decades, and increase overall efficiency in the office.

They would have none of that, telling him 'we've always done it this way.'

In the end, he realized things would not change. He quit and moved on to a successful company that used modern more efficient methods of getting the job done.

During the pandemic, many people started working remotely, usually out of their home. The system worked well, to a point, as people who had this luxury still had to get the job done and produce results.

A recent business news report released findings of a poll, where nearly half of people currently working from home, said they would quit their jobs if required to return to the workplace.

That's a bold statement considering those same people probably rely on a paycheck to survive. It may not be so easy to go for another job interview and tell your prospective employer you won't actually be coming into the office if hired.

They may see the situation differently, thank you for your time, and hire someone who is willing to show up at the office.

Company culture is an important part of doing business. It allows you to work with others and exchange ideas and work on projects together. It also fosters an important part of employer/employee and co-worker relationships.

Working from home can be a good thing, but after a while, if you do it full-time, you're going to be on your own island and missing new advances in your chosen profession.

Gemba - being in the 'actual place' is an important part of every job and provides a learning experience every time.