# DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION FOR MANUFACTURERS

## DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION GEMBA WALK GUIDE

To solve a problem, an individual or team requires a thorough understanding of the problem *and* its context — which can only be acquired by going to *where* the problem occurs. In lean/Toyota terminology, this is referred to as “going to the gemba” — i.e., going to the place or spot where the work occurs (the “gemba”). This is done via a “gemba walk.”

Small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMMEs) need to apply this same “gemba walk” thinking to the execution of digital transformation improvement projects. Improvement teams must go to the frontline and see for themselves *how* and *why* a digital weakness exists; this cannot be done by reviewing metrics on a computer screen, or talking about a problem in a distant conference room.

This *Digital Transformation Gemba Walk Guide* explains:

1. When and Where to Take a Gemba Walk
2. Gemba Walk Objectives
3. The Gemba Walk Process
4. Gemba Walk Rules

### 1. When and Where to Take a Gemba Walk

Many SMMEs have established mechanisms and visual systems to identify process problems and spur problem-solving. When key performance indicators (KPIs) warn of a problem, a team is formed to investigate. For the Digital Transformation for Manufacturers (DTM) process, the warning comes via findings of a Digital Transformation for Manufacturers Assessment:

1. *Problems identified:* The Assessment helps a team to identify digital weaknesses/gaps as it seeks digital maturity. Weaknesses typically occur within one or several of the eight DTM Assessment categories (e.g., production, warehouse, supply chain).
2. *Problems prioritized:* Teams complete an Improvement Plan, prioritizing problems and establishing improvement projects to address critical weaknesses.
3. *Project location:* The location of an improvement project — e.g., the plantfloor, a warehouse, a support function, at a customer site — is the location for the gemba walk. The improvement team’s understanding of the digital-transformation problem will help to scope the location for the gemba walk. For example, if material-handling problems and lack of real-time information occur at a warehouse loading dock, that will be the place to begin a gemba walk.
4. *Repeated gemba walks:* Gemba walks should be repeated for different shifts at the location and/or on different days of the week (e.g., a problem may be present on one shift or day, but not on others, perhaps due to different levels of employee skills or experience).

### 2. Gemba Walk Objectives

To optimize results, teams must set objectives for their time observing the frontline. A team typically seeks to:

* Gather as much information as possible to fully understand the digital weakness — through one-on-one conversations with management and frontline staff; photographs and/or videos of activities; and data and other information visually presented at the frontline.
* Quantify the weakness — frequency, breadth, processes effected, associated dollar value lost.
* Identify problems and potential problems associated with the digital weakness (e.g., lack of shipping-status information results in understaffing and an unsafe work environment).
* Collect ideas/suggestions from management and frontline employees on how *they* think the digital weakness should be addressed.

### 3. The Gemba Walk Process

The following process is common for most gemba walks:

* Communicate in advance to those in the location of the gemba walk, indicating when and why it will occur, and who will be visiting their work environment. Employees should not be surprised or worried about the presence of observers.
* If possible, follow the upstream flow of work in the area (i.e., start at the work closest to the customer, and then move back toward supplier processes).
* Look for examples — or lack thereof — of the availability of real-time metrics for management and frontline employees.
* Look for examples — or lack thereof — of real-time metrics being shared from the location with other corporate functions or supply-chain partners.
* Look for processes and work activities where automation and technologies might be applied to improve safety, quality, and efficiency of work — and to make work easier, more productive, and more rewarding for employees. In conversations, emphasize that automation and technologies are not intended to reduce employee counts, but that they may result in changing roles for employees.
* Ask questions directly related to the digital weakness, but also listen to concerns about other issues (they may turn out to be problems associated with the digital weakness).
* Identify problems related to safety and quality, and work to fix those immediately.
* Ask management and employees about their day-to-day roles and how the availability of real-time information — or lack thereof — affects their work.
* Ask about improvements underway in the area — especially those associated with corporate goals — and how management and frontline employees contribute to those improvements.
* Ask employees for suggestions. How would they address the digital weakness?
* Ask employees if they would like to participate in problem-solving to identify and address root causes of the digital weakness.

### 4. Gemba Walk Rules

* Respect all individuals encountered on the gemba walk.
* Attempt to engage all employees in conversation about their roles; what they like and don’t like about their work; and the problems they frequently encounter. If employees want to talk, listen; if they don’t want to talk, don’t force them.
* Ask questions to learn about the work and digitization of the work. If individuals want to talk about other things, be respectful and listen, but steer questions and conversations toward topics that help the gemba walk achieve its objectives.
* Show empathy for the employees and the problems they encounter, both at work and away from work.
* Ask employees how the digital-improvement team can help. Listen to their comments and requests, but don’t make commitments that may be difficult to keep. Try to engage them in applying their own ideas.
* Take a non-hierarchical approach. Do not present your title, standing in the company, or even role on the digital transformation team as being superior to frontline work.
* Do not tell management or frontline employees what to do, even when a problem is identified (unless a serious problem puts someone in imminent danger). Engage employees in the area with questions to help them recognize the problem on their own.
* Focus on the *process* as the source of digital weakness and/or problems — don’t assume it’s a personnel issue, and *never* assume or assign blame.
* Thank individuals for sharing information, and for the work they do daily.
* Tell management and frontline employees that their efforts are critical to the digital transformation of the company, and encourage them to contact the improvement team if they have ideas and suggestions after the gemba walk is over.