

Go to Gemba first

By Joop Bokern

This short story appeared in many discussions about KAIZEN, in several KAIZEN forums as well as during the KAIZEN Study Tours. Written by Joop Bokern, KAIZEN senior consultant from Netherland (KAIZEN Institute of Europe). Prior to joining KAIZEN, he was working for Philips, the famous giant electronic company in Europe. His story had taught us several important lessons about KAIZEN such as the importance of Gemba (work place) observation, Standardized work and also the improvement of Quality which should never be ended, never be satisfied with your current achievement.

When I sat down to write an article about my experiences with Japanese companies and their managers, the phrase "go to gemba first" came to mind as the predominant thought, since minimizing variability is an overriding concern for Japanese managers. (Gemba means where the value is added, and where the problem-solving is delegated.)

To illustrate, let me share my first lesson on the subject, in 1961 when I was a manager for a large electronics company in the Netherlands. I was responsible for transferring know-how and delivering machines from our factory to a Japanese electronic company with which we had a joint venture agreement. Before we delivered the equipment, the Japanese company sent four operators into my Netherlands factory to study our production process. In the Netherlands plant were 20 fully-automated lines running three shifts. Each line produced 2,000 semi conductor diodes per hour with a yield of 98 percent.

After about six months the Japanese plant had begun operations. We received a letter from the management thanking us for our cooperation and for the preciseness with which the machinery was set up. They also noted that their yield was 99.2 percent.

As a result, we went to Japan to study what had been done, asking our Japanese colleague, "What changes did you make to realize this higher yield?" His answer: "We made a study of your gemba and observed that you are following 60 different procedures (20 lines for three shifts). We discussed this and, with mutual consent from the gemba observers who had gone to the Netherlands, we decided on the best way to standardize the process." It was clear how much respect the Japanese managers had for the gemba and how much they consulted with them. Since that time, "go to gemba first" has been a firm conviction of mine.

As a quality manager for the Phillips Audio division, I visited a car assembly plant in West Germany. Discussions centered around Phillips' radio assembly for its cars. (In this situation, we were facing stiff competition from a Japanese supplier.) I requested a visit to the gemba and, after explaining that gemba in this case was where the car radio was installed into the car, was taken on a plant visit.

When I arrived at the gemba I was fortunate to find the workers installing our radios. I asked the operator (who did not know I represented a supplier) how he judged the quality of the radio. He replied, "Since last week it has been very bad." I asked whether the sound quality was poor. He answered, "Oh, no, sir, I never listen to the sound quality. But please take a look at how the products are stacked on the pallet. The other supplier provides them for me in a very convenient way for me to do my job; but these have had their stacking method changed. I have tried to persuade our purchasing people to order more radios from the other supplier."

When I returned to my plant I checked what had happened. It turned out that a suggestion had been made to change the stacking method to load a few more radios on a pallet. This provided a small savings in transportation costs, but the customer's gemba was not asked to give their comments on the change. We reversed the change in order to keep our volume of orders with the car company. The rule was reinforced: "Go to gemba first."

What I see here is that motivation cannot be a goal in itself-it is the result of a well-managed process. "Go to gemba" and talk with the gemba; they will tell you how to support them to perform a better job tomorrow!

In conclusion I would like to say it is not quality management, but management of quality, that counts. Good management means establishing control, maintaining, and improving the process. Don't forget that the gemba runs the processes where value is added for the customer.

- To establish control, you must be able to measure;
- To measure you must be able to define;
- To define you must be able to quantify.
- Quantifying is only possible at the place where value is added: **the gemba.**

Go to Gemba first!