

INTRODUCTION

Gemba. What a wonderful word. The place—any place in any organization—where humans create value. But how do we understand the gemba? And, more important, how do we make it a better place—one where we can create more value with less waste, variation, and overburden (also known, respectively, as muda, mura, and muri)?

I've been thinking about these questions for many years, and learned long ago that the first step is to take a walk to understand the current condition. In the Lean Community we commonly say, "Go see, ask why, show respect." I've always known this intuitively, even before I had a standard method, and even when I labored in the university world where it seemed natural to learn by gathering data at arm's length and then evaluating it in an office through the lens of theory. Now I work in an opposite manner by verifying reality on the gemba and using this understanding to create hypotheses for testing about how things can work better.

I learned long ago that the most productive way to walk is to follow a single product family or product design or customer-facing process from start to finish. As I do this I look at each step with the eye of the customer and from the perspective of those actually creating the value, asking how more can be achieved with less.

Over the past 30 years I have tried to take as many walks along as many “value streams” as I could. Nearly 10 years ago, in the aftermath of September 11, I felt the members of the Lean Community should be in closer contact, and so I started writing down and sharing my thoughts and observations from these walks. They took the form of my monthly eletters that have been sent in recent years to more than 150,000 readers around the world. These have sometimes been based on a single walk, but are often the merged insights of many.

In handing off the baton of leadership at LEI to John Shook in the fall of 2010, I wanted to bundle up the findings of these gemba walks. I have organized these eletters by the most important themes and now present them to the Lean Community in one volume.

In reading through my letters, I found one critical topic—lean management—where I had not written all I wanted to say. So I have composed two new essays, *The Work of Management* and *Modern Management vs. Lean Management*, and placed them at the end of the section on Management. I also found myself reflecting on where the lean movement has been and on what I need to focus on in my future walks. My thoughts are presented in a final essay, previously unpublished, titled *Hopeful Hansei*.

I have tried to treat my letters as historical artifacts, produced at a specific time and informed by a visit to a certain

place. Thus I have largely resisted the temptation—felt by every author—to improve them. However, I have removed some material that is no longer relevant and corrected a few errors of fact. More important, I discovered in reading over the letters that on a number of points I wasn't as clear in explaining my ideas as I should have been and once thought I was. Now, after reflection and a bit of kaizen—the C and A steps in Dr. Deming's plan-do-check-act improvement process—I hope I am.

This said, it's important to make you aware that these letters were never written to some grand plan. They were driven by problems I was hearing from the Lean Community at a given moment or by what I was encountering on the gemba, often accidentally while looking for something else. Thus there is some repetition of themes. And some important issues—notably standardized work and lean accounting—get very little attention.

In addition, the essays are no longer presented in the chronological sequence of their composition. I have instead grouped them by categories that I have devised after rereading the entire collection. While I think this is helpful to the reader, many essays—including the first one on *Purpose, Process, People*—could easily be placed within several categories because they address more than one topic. To deal with the difficulty this may present for readers with a specific issue

or question in mind, an index of the themes, topics, terms, individuals, and organizations covered in the essays appears at the end of this book.

I do think these eletters—which I will refer to in this book as essays to denote their modest modification from the originals—stand the test of time. But most need to be placed in context: Why this topic at this time to address this issue? What is the connection of this essay to the others? I have provided a context with commentaries prior to or after each essay. In these brief passages I reflect on why a given topic is important or offer additional insights I have gained subsequent to my walk and writing of the original essay.

A book recounting gemba walks could never have been written without a gemba to walk. Lacking any of my own, excepting LEI, I have had to ask for help from many members of the Lean Community. And you have been invariably helpful in granting me what used to be known—a long time ago when I was in high school—as a “hall pass,” a permit to roam freely in your organizations and often to ask awkward questions. I will always be grateful for the help I have received from so many, and I hope I have been true to my promise to reveal nothing uncomplimentary about any efforts of yours that are identified by name in my essays. (Of course, I found many things to criticize anonymously and many more things to remark on privately during or after my visits, I hope for a good end.)

I could never have had such productive visits without others to walk with me, both in person and in an intellectual dialogue. Foremost among these is Dan Jones, my frequent coauthor, sometime cowalker, and constant cothinker about all things lean for more than 30 years. Many of my walks and the resulting essays tackled a certain topic, took a specific form, or arrived at certain conclusions after collaborative lean thinking with Dan. And a few summarize our joint work in the books we have written. I have been truly blessed to have such a friend for more than half of my walk through life.

I was lucky again nearly 20 years ago when I encountered John Shook. There are many walks I would not have taken without John's urging, perhaps most memorably my walk through Ford's empty Model T factory in Highland Park, MI (see back cover). And on many other walks I would not have noticed the truly important thing without John's sensei guidance. In addition, several of the essays are involved centrally with John's contribution to the promotion of value-stream mapping and A3 thinking.

We are still walking together as John Shook takes on the leadership role at LEI, and I join Dan in the role of senior advisor. I trust that we will keep on gemba walking together for years to come.

Finally, anyone who knows me knows that I've needed lots of help just finding the starting point to take my walks. For many years the team at LEI has struggled daily to keep me

pointed in the right direction. I thank them all, but I'm especially grateful to the following:

Helen Zak and Rachel Regan helped me determine which gemba to visit, especially when many members of the Lean Community suggested their gemba, and my time was limited. They also read and organized for my review the many comments I received.

Jean Krulic figured out how to get there, got the plane tickets, found a hotel, and provided comprehensive directions. She was also my refugee when things went wrong en route, as they often did. (Air travel is not a capable process!)

Jon Carpenter figured out the expenses and tactfully refrained from asking (as was his right as LEI's CFO) whether the benefits were always greater than my costs.

Tom Ehrenfeld edited my monthly eletters for the nearly 10 years I wrote them, and he provided invaluable advice in putting this volume together. It's hard to put up with an editor who constantly tells you that you can do better, but I have tried to grin and bear Tom's advice, with major benefits for my readers.

Chet Marchwinski, in his role as LEI communications director, and Josh Rapoza, LEI director of web operations, prepared the eletters for sending and tried to catch any errors.

George Taninecz, as project manager, guided this volume from start to finish with a schedule that kept staring at me sternly as I kept thinking of other, easier things to do instead.

Thomas Skehan, as with practically all LEI publications, gave this volume its look and feel. The high visual and tactile quality of our publications at LEI over the 13 years I ran the organization owes everything to Thomas and nothing to me.

Jane Bulnes-Fowles played the final, critical role at LEI of efficiently and effectively coordinating production planning and the distribution and launch of the book.

I hope you will enjoy these essays. They have been a great joy to me because the walks upon which they are based have been my primary means of learning. I hope you have, or will develop, a similar method that provides similar satisfaction and insight. And I hope that as long as you have an interest in creating value you will continue to go see on the gemba, through periodic walks, and that you will ask why while showing respect. I'll be continuing my walks in my new role as senior advisor at LEI, so I hope I will see you there.

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