



Improvement Learning, Improved.

GA 021 | Plato's Cave Allegory & Its Relevance For Lean Thinkers with Ron Pereira

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[Ron] You're listening to episode 21 with Ron Pereira.

[background music]

[Announcer] Welcome to the Gemba Academy Podcast, the show that's focused on helping individuals and companies achieve breakthrough results using the same continuous improvement principles leveraged by companies such as Toyota, Del Monte, and the US Department of Defense.

[Ron] Hey there, this is Ron Pereira from Gemba Academy and I'd like to welcome you to another episode of the Gemba Academy podcast... as always, I definitely want to thank you for taking the time to listen to the show and for watching our continuous improvement videos over at GembaAcademy.com.

Like we did a few weeks ago... I'm going to be flying solo today.

We do have many more guests lined up but we plan to mix some shorter solo shows like this one in from time to time to keep things fresh and fun!

Obviously, your feedback is very important to us so please let us know what you think of our approach to these podcasts... if you prefer one style over another or have new ideas please do me a huge favor and leave a comment at the bottom of the show notes for this episode which can be found at GembaPodcast.com/21. And that's 2-1 for twenty-one. So, GembaPodcast.com/21.

Now then, during this episode I do plan to get a little philosophical but don't worry... since the things we're going to explore are immediately applicable to any continuous improvement practitioner.

In fact, even if you're not a practitioner of continuous improvement I'm confident the lessons will resonate with you as well. So, let's get to the show.

[music transition]

[Ron] One of my passions in life is to learn new things. And while I definitely enjoy reading books focused on continuous improvement I also enjoy studying philosophy.

And what's even more interesting is the more I learn about people like Taiichi Ohno the more I realize their teaching is extremely rich with philosophical thought.

And for those that don't know Taiichi Ohno is one of the chief architects of the Toyota Production System which is where the Lean Thinking concepts we know and love find their roots.

In any event, today I want to explore one of Plato's famous allegories since I see a tremendous relationship between it and the

many challenges we, as continuous improvement practitioners, face.

Now, this particular allegory is written as a dialogue between Plato's brother Glaucon and his mentor Socrates.

The gist of the allegory goes something like this.

Plato asks us to imagine a cave. Inside the cave are people bound by their feet and neck and, as a result, are only able to look straight ahead at the wall in front of them.

Behind these people are steep steps that have been cut through the cave and lead to the outside world.

Above these steps is a large crevice that's been cut into the cave wall where a large fire burns.

And, as a result of the light of this blazing fire, the prisoners can see their own shadows on the wall.

Next, we're told there's a walk way built in between the prisoners and the fire. You might imagine this walkway looking like a modern day mezzanine or catwalk built up around a factory.

The key to this walkway is that it's placed directly between the prisoners and the fire. Additionally, there's a wall on this walkway that people can walk behind without being seen similar to the way puppeteers work behind a wall.

And, as it turns out, people do in fact walk behind this wall while holding up various puppet like shapes and figures which, due to

the light of the fire, cast additional shadows on the wall. You can think of this as one of the first cinemas ever built!

When all combined these various shadows, along with the echo's of the people talking on the walkway, create the only reality these shackled prisoners have ever known.

In other words, the only thing these prisoners believe to be "real" are the shadows they see on the walls and the echoing voices of the people moving along the walkway.

And, to be fair, since these shadows are the only thing these cave inhabitants have ever seen who could really blame them?

At this point, Socrates asks Glaucon to imagine someone from the outside world entering the cave and unshackling one of the prisoners.

Initially, the now free person turns around and is immediately overwhelmed... he sees the steep steps, the incredible fire, the walkway, and the puppet like shapes being held up behind the wall.

The prisoner is now totally conflicted and struggles to make sense of what's actually true. In other words, the freed man wonders what's real... these new objects he's never seen or the familiar shadows on the wall?

At this point in the story we're told the person is then drug from the cave and forced to go outside.

And, as you can imagine, the bright light of the sun nearly blinds

the man... but, once his eyes adjust, the newly liberated person is completely overcome with emotion.

The freed man is now blown away and desperate to share this incredible news with his fellow cave dwellers... as such he goes back to the cave and attempts to explain this new amazing reality to the other shackled prisoners.

Sadly, the other inhabitants don't want to hear anything about some fantastic outside world.

You see, these people have grown comfortable with their life and don't appreciate this excited person's attempt to destroy the only reality they've ever known.

And, believe it or not, since the freed person now struggles to even recognize the old shadows on the wall the shackled prisoners actually mock him explaining how this new amazing world of his has actually caused him to lose his edge.

And, as incredible as it may seem, the shackled prisoners go so far as to warn the freed man that if he dare tries to release any of them they'll do everything in their power to kill him.

With all of this said, the story concludes with Socrates explaining to Glaucon, that the freed person must return to the cave in order to share their enlightenment with the shackled prisoners, even if it results in death.

So, let me ask you a few questions. As you move forward with your life – both personally and professionally – how many shadows are you mistaking for reality?

And as it pertains to continuous improvement how many cave inhabitants are battling you as you attempt to unshackle them and show them a new, improved, reality?

Put another way, group think and attitudes like “this is the way we’ve always done it” and “you wouldn’t understand... our business is different” may in fact be nothing more than shadows on the wall.

Our challenge as continuous improvement practitioners is to never stop learning or seeking better ways of working. Additionally, we should do everything in our power to enlighten as many people as we can with the good news that is continuous improvement.

And, if we do happen to encounter modern day cave dwellers who have never seen, or experienced, how powerful – and life changing – authentic lean thinking can be, we must be willing to unshackle them and drag them along even at the risk of being mocked and ridiculed.

And, while it won’t be easy... imagine the incredible impact each of us can make if we’re even mildly successful.

Again, thanks so much for listening to our podcast... I’d really like to hear your thoughts on this episode... so please head over to GembaPodcast.com/21 and scroll to the bottom of the post and leave a comment.

Specifically, I’m truly interested to hear your take on this famous allegory. I’d also love to know whether you’ve encountered so-called cave dwellers? Or perhaps you were once a cave dweller yourself and found a way to break free.

No matter your story I'd really enjoy hearing from you.

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