

GA 26 | Michael Bremer

Presenter: You're listening to Episode 26 with Michael Bremer.

[background music]

Presenter: 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.

Now, here's your host, Ron Pereira.

Ron Pereira: Hey, there. This is Ron Pereira with Gemba Academy.

I'd like to welcome you to another edition of the Gemba Academy podcasts. As always, thank you so much for taking time out of your day to listen to the show and for watching our videos over at Gembaacademy.com. We definitely appreciate you.

Today's episode is going to be pretty exciting. I have a gentleman named Michael Bremer on show. Many of you are familiar with Michael's work. He's a blogger and author. He's done some really good work across the Lean community.

Today, what we're going to talk about is gemba walk. Michael's recently an e-book that he talks about, focused on how to go about doing gemba walks, really, at kind of the shop floor level, the supervisor level, not just from kind of an executive level.

I think you're going to really enjoy this show. We talk about what gemba walks are, the different types of walks and how to go about them yourself.

Now, Michael is the president of the Cumberland Group out of Chicago and he goes ahead and talks a little bit about that business and what he does on a day to day basis in the episode. But Michael is also a pretty key volunteer for the Association for Manufacturing Excellence or AME.

As many people know, AME puts on a massive conference each year. This year, the conference is going to be in Jacksonville, Florida, from November 10th through the 14th.

Gemba academy attended the conference last year, we had a booth. We're going back this year. In fact, we have two booths put together this year, just so that we have a little bit more room. If you are planning to be at the AME conference this year, please stop by to say hello. We'll have lots of goodies to give away and we'd definitely love to say hello.

I also want to say that AME and Gemba Academy are working together this year. We're happy to say that you can get a 10 percent discount on the price of admission to the conference by using a certain coupon code.

What I wanted to do is, if you're interested in going to the conference, if you haven't signed up yet, be sure to go to Gembapodcast.com/ame. Again, that's Gembapodcast.com/ame, and the coupon code is going to be there as well as all the information that you'll need to kind of get signed up.

Again, it's a fantastic conference. I think it's probably one of the best if not the best Lean-thinking-centered conferences in the world, so be sure to check that out if you're interested.

The show notes for this particular episode can be found over at Gembapodcast.com/26. That's 2-6, so Gembapodcast.com/26. All right. Enough from me. Let's get to the show.

[music]

Ron: All right, Michael. Well, thank you so much for taking time out of your day to come onto the show. Where are you calling in from today?

Michael Bremer: I'm calling in from Chicago my favorite time of year. It's fall. It's just beautiful outside, a great day.

Ron: Very nice, very nice. Your Bears are off to a good start I guess, right?

Michael: [laughs] Yeah, the Bears had an amazing win yesterday.

[laughter]

Ron: All right.

Michael: It was the luck of the draw. It could go either way.

Ron: Exactly, exactly. All right, Michael. Why don't you start things off by telling us a little bit about your background and how you first came to learn about Lean thinking?

Michael: My background's a tad eclectic. I've been involved in this field of performance improvement for more than 30 years. Originally with a Fortune 30 company that no longer exists, but it's not my fault.

Ron: [laughs] OK.

Michael: I was given the responsibility in the 1980s of creating a company-wide improvement effort under the productivity banner for Beatrice Foods. When I was doing that, I spent time with a guy named Edward Deming and Joseph Juran.

Ron: [laughs] Yeah, OK.

Michael: I only wish that I could spend time with those guys now because I certainly learned a lot when I spent time with them at that point in time. Now I know enough to really learn a lot. [laughs] Now it was pretty fabulous.

I started doing that in the days of total quality management and really became introduced to Lean in the mid-1990s through some degree of Womack's writings, but we were doing some work with Pratt and Whitney. Pratt was one of the early adapters of some of the Toyota Lean methodologies, so we learned about kaizen. At that point in time I thought Lean was kaizen and just the rapid improvement team sort of thing and then just gradually came to have a deeper and much more holistic understanding of it over the last I guess 20 years now.

Ron: OK, so what are you up to these days?

Michael: I'm doing a couple of things. We manage a consortium group here in Chicago called The Chicagoland Lean Enterprise Consortium. It's a group of manufacturing companies. We do no consulting with them, but we facilitate their learning from one another and had that for about five years.

I almost feel like a proud father when I go in and look at these organizations, how well they've progressed today versus where they're at. We're talking about starting one for service organizations. I've had a couple of large service organizations in Chicago that have approached us with the idea of doing it there.

We still continue to consult, although at the age that I am right now I've not been promoting that a whole lot. A lot of what we'll do is, if an organization would like to take its improvement activities IT and take it up to the next level of maturity to elevate what it is they're doing, that's the focus of a lot of our writing, a lot of our work, and certainly a lot of my passion today.

It doesn't take a whole lot of time but what does an organization need to do to elevate its level of improvement maturity. We'll still do that.

Ron: Now I also understand that you are pretty involved with AME and their conferences. Is that right?

Michael: I am. Sometimes my volunteer work for AME almost seems like a part-time job.

Ron: [laughs]

Michael: I'll give them 20 to 25 percent of my time. One of my personal responsibilities is I'm in charge of the AME Manufacturing Excellence Award programs, and we're just finishing up that cycle. We had 15 people that applied for the award this year. We did 10 site visits, and four of those companies ended up being manufacturing award recipients.

We'll be recognizing them at the annual conference that's coming up in Jacksonville this November the 10th to the 15th. I'd say some people call it a Lean conference, but I really think it's more about performance excellence. What does an organization need to elevate again its level of improvement effectiveness?

The key thing about AME is much of that is practitioner-to-practitioner learning. We allow consultants to do some things on Monday and Friday during the conference in workshops, but the presentations that take place during the week are all from practitioners.

Then there are also tours. There's a ton of activity that takes place during a conference, and anybody that wants to learn more about this I'd encourage them to find out more about AME. It's a great organization.

Ron: Well, Gemba Academy, just a small plug, [laughs] is going to be at the AME conference this year in Jacksonville. We did a double booth this time, so we have a little bit more breathing room. We definitely hope all of our listeners check that out.

Just to help drive people to that website, and we're not compensated at all for this -- we just want to drive people to the website because we think it's a great conference -- just go to Gimbapodcast.com/AME. That's going to bring you right to the Jacksonville AME 2014 Conference page there.

I'll tell you the one that I'm most excited about. There are obviously tons of great speakers, but Simon Sinek is one of my favorite guys. I don't know if he would [laughs] call himself a Lean thinker per se, but golly, his "Why?" video, that famous TED Talk video, is one of my all-time favorite videos. I'm so happy to see him.

Michael: He's all about engaging people and more meaning in the work activities that people do, which totally fits with what we're trying to accomplish from a Lean perspective.

Ron: Yup, so we'll be there. I'll come find you, and Michael, we'll make another video or something. [laughs]

Michael: That sounds great. We'll actually have an award booth in the exhibit area this year for the first time.

Ron: Oh, great.

Michael: We'll definitely have time to chat. We're going to be staffing that with some of our assessors that are doing this. It'll be fun. It's a great conference.

Ron: Very good, very good. All right. Well, Michael, what we like to do at the beginning of all of our episodes is have our guest share a quotation that's maybe focused on leadership or continuous improvement that inspires them. What quotation inspires you, Michael?

Michael: There are actually two of them that I could talk too quickly. There's my favorite all-time quote. I'm not certain if it's attributable to Satchel Paige, who was a pitcher in the Negro Leagues for many years, or to Will Rogers. I've seen several sources attribute these words to both of those individuals.

The quote goes, "It isn't what you know that gets you in trouble. It's what you think you know that just isn't so. [laughs] That whole idea just seems to mesh so much with the things that we're doing with Lean and performance improvement. It really does go down to the words that Shook and Rother used in "Learning to See," and it's much more than value-stream mapping.

A lot of this is letting go of how you think the world works and seeing what it is that's really going on. In that quote so much captures that. Then there's a guy named Thom Hartmann, who's been president of a couple of business units. He's done a number of things for Autoliv. It's a company that is at least at a Toyota level of improvement effectiveness, and Thom has a quote. It's a formula for success. What he shared, it's so simple. If I can get more people adding more value -- and more value in the way their skills, their capabilities, their collaboration, their general knowledge -- so more people adding more value and doing it more frequently, Thom's formula is that equals a perpetual improvement machine.

Again, that captures very much what it is that we're trying to do with these activities of developing as many people as possible to actually live a more fulfilled

life, in many ways, and to be able to contribute more at work, and hopefully have a better life outside of work.

Ron: Nice. As I mentioned in the intro, you haven't heard that yet, but the intro to this episode, Michael, we're going to focus on gemba walks, and just really explore that. You've written an e-book focused on this topic that I'll explore here in a little bit, as well.

Why don't we just start at square one here, so to speak? Tell us what is a gemba walk, and then perhaps explain how it's different than the old school method of managers simply walking around through the office or the factory.

Michael: Yeah, the old Tom Peters thing of just management by walking around. I actually think the intention of management by walking around was do what we talk about in gemba walks, but I don't think at the time they had really thought through how to give that much structure or focus. They were thinking, "If you just went and you looked, you learned."

What a gemba walk is, of course, the expression, it's another one of these Japanese terms. I try not to use too many of those.

Ron: [laughs] Gemba's a good one, though, Gemba Academy and all that. [laughs]

Michael: It fits with another Japanese term called Genchi Genbutsu. I looked at a Toyota website as we were writing the e-book. On the Toyota's website, it defined this as going to the source to find the facts, to make correct decisions, to build consensus, and to achieve goals. That's a pretty comprehensive statement. That's actually not a bad way to live life.

I love the slang expression for this, though, which is to get your boots on and go see the reality of what it is that's really happening. A gemba walk is really helping us to avoid making assumptions about what it is that we think is happening, things that we only know from a distance, and going to see with our own eyes so we've got a deeper understanding of what it is that's really taking place.

Ron: That's what it is, but why should anyone do them?

Michael: When I wrote the e-book, I've had this good fortune to have met many people around the world. One of the people that I shared what we were writing with was Dr. Jeffrey Liker, who of course has written a lot about Toyota and Lean. One of the things that Jeff was saying to me as to why do one is he thinks the way a lot of people do gemba walks is it actually is like the old management by walking around.

People go out. They want to set some direction with challenging targets, and so they want to go out and share that, and they do want to see more effectively what it is that's happening. But the people that do this the best actually elevate what's happening there, and I think it's a key reason for doing a gemba walk.

You want to be able to go out, and you want to teach associates, the people that you work with, to develop their ability to perform and to fix, and to improve their processes, and to be more comfortable coming forward with things that it is we need to improve.

If you're out there having these conversations, it's an opportunity to build trust, which is very difficult in organizations throughout the world. It's not just a North American problem. Most organizations, there's not a lot of trust between the people that are doing the work and the people that are leading the organization. As leaders, it takes a lot of tenacity and a lot of discipline to elevate what it is you're doing to the level of a Toyota. The discipline with which they go about doing this is simply amazing.

The gemba walks are one of the things that, as you're out there getting in touch with reality, you're in a position to be fine-tuning what it is we need to do. After the walk, a lot of what happens when people don't sustain the gains, is they're not adjusting what we at Cumberland call the support system, so the way we do planning, the way we measure performance, the way we communicate. If I go out and get this firsthand feedback from what's happening inside my organization, I can adjust those support systems so that they're more in alignment with what it is that we're trying to accomplish, and make it happen.

Ron: What kind of problems do people typically encounter during these gemba walks?

Michael: It fits some with what we'll talk about with, "What does an effective walk look like?" The first thing is there's no clear purpose. I just decide I'm going to go on a walk. [laughs] You're waltzing through the park, and, "Oh, that looks nice."

There's different walks. I can be doing a walk to look for waste. I can be doing a walk to look for, "Do people really understand what's going on?" I can be doing a walk for coaching purposes.

A first line supervisor would typically do a very different walk from what an external executive's doing when he or she is coming in to visit a plant and see what's going on there.

Problems arise when people think there's one type of gemba walk. We just go through and we do this. Another problem might be that people try to do too much in one walk. That you've got all this stuff that it is you want to accomplish, and you want to change the world.

This is one stroll through the organization. It's a small step, as Neil Armstrong said in stepping on the moon. But that step was the product, or the end result, of many steps that had been taken prior to that.

Gemba walks, as you do these, you gain experience. You're in a better position to do a more effective walk each time that you go, and so not trying to do too much as you're out there.

The biggest problem is the lack of a clear purpose, and why we're doing this. What are we hoping to accomplish?

Ron: Give me an example of what a well done gemba walk could look like. Maybe start at a front line supervisor. What's it look like?

Michael: We say that there's three steps, so before the front line supervisor is going out, just defining a purpose for, "Why am I doing this walk?" Let's just say that there's two purposes that the supervisor might be exploring.

The first purpose might be a waste walk to go and find where are we doing things that create waste inside the organization, so you work the classic Eight Wastes. Another, a little bit more focused, is to just get an understanding of standard work practices of what it is that's going on inside the organization in terms of standard work, and do people really understand what that is.

It's a waste, but it's a different perspective on what it is that you're doing. Determine, "Why am I doing this walk?"

When I'm doing the walk, I really want to go through and have no judgment. I simply want to understand and start to have conversations with people.

You want to go see with an open mind. I want to go with as few beliefs as possible, understand what it is that's happening. When I see what's going on, I want to be talking about asking "Why are you doing it this way?" to develop a deeper understanding. I'm probing.

A lot of people who jump right to define whys, but sometimes you want to understand the whats first, so that a very well framed, humble question. "What is it you're doing? What are the performance metrics that it is you're working toward?" Then I can go to the whys. "Why are those the metrics? Why is this happening? Why are you doing the work this way?"

Ron: Very Simon Cynic-y whys I would say.

[laughter]

Michael: Absolutely, totally from that.

There was a neat story that Dan McDonald who was working for a large Fortune 50 company at the time shared with me. They were doing a gemba walk. There was a plant manager was doing the walk. They're going through, and they're looking at

an old line manufacturing company. What they see is that the people are taking the parts they're working on and they're grinding it to make to make it fit. They simply ask, "Why are you grinding this?"

The answer is, "I'm grinding this to make it fit."

Another why is, "Why didn't it fit?" There was never a clear answer, so they left a couple of questions with the folks on the line for operator and the supervisor. They came back at the end of the day to revisit it again.

Since they work in the Five Whys, until they did the walk the next day, they didn't discover the root cause, but what they found was the specifications that they were working for, the drawings that they were using to do this particular part, were 40 years old.

What had happened is there had been sort of this tolerance stack-up that had taken place over the years. So for 40 years whenever the operator would get a piece that didn't fit, they grind it to make it fit. Now they're doing tack time so it causes them to miss their tack time.

Nobody ever asked why. A lot of what it is, the supervisor can do is you go and all of a sudden you see these things and you just whack yourself in your head and say, "Oh, my gosh. I had no idea this was going on."

You see that. The third component to doing the walk is showing respect for the people that are there. Because you're there doing the walk and you're the manager, let's just assume for the moment that you're smart. What you want you want to do though is not show how smart you are. You want to be developing the people that you're working with. You want to be improving their critical thinking skills. So if you can ask these questions and show respect as you're doing that, you can really help the people that you're working with to develop their capabilities.

The third component of the walk, so we can prepare for the walk, I'm actually doing the walk and the third step is there should be a periodic debrief after the walk of assessing how it is we're doing. In the case of a first-line supervisor, what that person should be doing is she should be meeting with her leader and the other first-line supervisors periodically to talk about the effectiveness of their walk.

What are we doing well? What is it that we can improve? What is it that you're learning? What are you doing that's allowing you to more effectively engage with the people that are in your area? And begin to share that knowledge and get more people operating that way as they're doing it.

Ron: What about standard work, Michael? Should there be some standard work developed for these gemba walks?

Michael: Absolutely there should be standard work for doing the gemba walks, but the more important standard work is there should be standard work that the people are doing [laughs] that I'm going to be observing.

Just think about it. If you want to go through and do a gemba walk, and let's just say you're going to do a daily walk, and I go through and I see what's going on today. I go through a different section to my operation tomorrow, and I've got people that are doing the work in varying ways.

I've learned that people do the work in varying ways, and that's a neat insight. But in terms of improving and stabilizing what it is that were going on, there's so much variation that's taking place in an environment like that from the different ways that people operate that being able to do a highly effective gemba walk is a challenge because there's so much variation.

With all that variation any changes that it is that you're talking about doing, you have no idea of what the impact is going to be in the changes that are made because of all the other variations taking place, if that makes sense.

Ron: Yes.

Michael: I think in early walk if you start see that we have ineffective standard work practices, it's more important to start standardizing the work that people are doing than it is to be doing gemba walks. You really want to stabilize the processes.

Once you've got the processes somewhat stabilized, you can take another tool, another thing that it is that we're doing, these gemba walks, and I can begin to use those elevating further increasing the effectiveness of what it is that we're doing. There's a best practice for doing just about anything. Best practice in Company A may differ from what Company B is doing given their level of maturity, given their situation, given their market. But within those organizations, we want to continually strive to find what is the best practice for doing this? I determine the best practice by going back and having a clear purpose on what it was we were talking about.

Very much with Mike Rother's writing in Toyota Kata, what's the target that it is that we're trying to accomplish? It's great language for doing a gemba walk. I could take Mike's Kata language and use that for doing my gemba walks.

What's the target we're trying to hit? How am I going to measure if we're progressing toward that target? With the gemba walks it's the same thing. What's our target? How are we measuring our progress of whether we're doing this effectively or not? And what is it we need to be doing to elevate the walks across the board?

Once I get the processes somewhat stabilized, there'll always be some stuff that comes up that you start to look for the exceptions. At O. C. Tanner, and certainly at Toyota, there are exceptions that happen all the time. It's just in an organization like that that the abnormalities that arise on a daily basis are much fewer than happens in most organizations. Most organizations the entire day [laughs] is a set of abnormalities that take place in individual problem solving that happens that one after the other. These elite organizations have done a lot to stabilize the environment.

Ron: One question that I had is, I know that there's never going to be a one-size-fits-all, but do you have any suggestions for how long a gemba walk should last and how often they should be done?

Michael: It is situationally dependent, so let's talk about two types. If I'm the first-line supervisor, I probably want to do two or maybe even three walks during a shift. I've seen some places where they'll go through and they'll do this even on an

hourly basis. But I say most of the time if I'm doing them two or three times a day, I should be pretty in touch with what's going on.

What I'm doing is I'm establishing this pattern. People know that I'm going to be coming through the area to look and see what it is that's going on. I would do a walk like that probably in about 15 minutes.

You scope how much can I get done effectively in 15 minutes? I may not be looking at the entire operation. I might be looking at pieces of the operation on a walk. Or if I've got just one cell that I'm responsible for as a lead person, then I'm doing that walk. It might a 10-minute walk to quickly go through and see what is happening.

For example, one of the things that they'll do once a month in their walks is they'll look at their operational equipment effectiveness, the OEE metric, their first pass yields of the equipment it is they're using. They don't look at that daily, though.

I think the first week of the month, that'd be one of the activities that I do on my walk when I'm doing the walk. By walking the second week might have a slightly different focus of what it is that we're looking at, but I'm doing it quickly. If I'm the plant manager, I'm probably going to spend an hour. I would hope that they're doing that walk at least once a day. I'm probably covering quite a bit of the facility that it is that we're in. It might take me a week to get through an entire large facility. But the plant manager is going through to get a deeper understanding of what it is that they're tapping into things that are going on.

An external executive that's coming in from the outside instead of spending an hour or two hours inside a conference room where they're looking at financial results, which is sort of the traditional model. Instead those outside executives really should be spending time walking through the facility to get a deeper understanding of what's really happening in the organization. Those walks could be an hour or two depending on the size of the business.

Ron: I remember from past lives and other companies that I had visited, there was situations where these executives the closest they came to the Gemba was that Power Point doc at the end-of-month review. If they showed up for one time a year,

it would be this huge shock [chuckles] to the plant that the big boss was walking through.

Gosh, if these people would just take the time to visit the places where value is added, businesses would just thrive. I'm convinced of it.

Michael: There was a great story that Steven Spear wrote in his book. He was originally changing the rabbit. I think he changed the title to "High Velocity." The story that's in there is powerful.

What you had at the Toyota Georgetown plant is you had a supervisor that had come to work for that plant that previously had worked for General Motors. The President of Toyota at the time was Fujio Cho. Fujio was coming to the Georgetown plant to do a visit.

The supervisor, knowing how the typical General Motors executive came to visit, was in the process of trying to find the perfect car so that if they stopped by his area, he could show him a car that had no defects. He wanted to fence this car off. Of course, he's trying to get his people to go through extra scrubbing and get the area all clean and that sort of stuff.

His manager came over to him during the day and saw that he was doing this, and he had this car with ropes around it. [laughs] He asks the question, "What's going on?" The guy explained the story that I just shared.

The manager said, "That's not what Mr. Cho is going to want to see when he comes through."

The guy looks at him and says, "What's Mr. Cho going to want to see?"

The plant manager closes his eyes, turns in a circle, and randomly points at some car somewhere in the line. He says, "He's going to want to see that one."

[laughter]

Michael: The guy is sort of shocked. He told the guy, "Why would he want to see that one?"

He said, "He's going to want to see that one, and he's going to want to know everything that's wrong with that car. Then he's going to want to know what are you doing to address the issues that are there?"

They turned around from having this perfect car in this pretend world. The thing at GM, is we all want to pretend like the world is working the way we wish it existed. The other thing that's going on there is you as a manager are responsible for getting these problems fixed and not bothering the people above you with these problems you are trying to get fixed. It's a simple statement, but that's the culture that's there. What this guy didn't realize is, "Wow, here at Toyota they want to know what's really going on. Isn't that a novelty?"

What he did with the car is he took this random car that they had selected and they put Post-its all over the car where there was a scratch, or where there was a blemish, or whatever was going on with the automobile. When Fujio came through and saw that, he spent a bunch of time talking about this car and talking about what's going on to resolve the problems that it is they're coming up with. You just want to bang your head against the wall and say, "Why would somebody want to operate in this pretend world when if we knew what was really going on, we could do so much about it and make so much happen." I think those people want to do the right stuff.

Ron: It's fear. That's why. Let's be honest. It's fear. So many of these traditionally-run companies, if you make a mistake, you get a trouble or you get reprimanded of some sort so whereas a Lean-thinking company, and Toyota is not the only one out there, as you know. Pull the cord if there's a problem. Stop the line, almost celebrate it for doing that versus being in trouble.

Michael: Absolutely.

Ron: Michael, let's go ahead and transition now into what we call in a quick fire section. This is where you get to share your personal thoughts and wisdom, which you've obviously been doing but we're focusing a little bit on Michael now, OK?

Michael: OK.

Ron: The first question is, we talked a little bit about this already in this conversation, but we Lean thinkers spend a lot of time talking about the importance of respect for people, but it can be hard to put your finger on what exactly does it mean. What does respect for people mean to you, Michael?

Michael: It really means trust. One of the job responsibilities I had when I worked for Beatrice Foods. I had done this improving thing, and then they promoted me to the director of the information systems group. I had had some IT experience when I worked for McDonald Douglas when I was in college and going to school and they found out I had that. They said, "You can be the director of information systems. You know about the suburban stuff. This organization needs to be fixed."

My problem was I was a technical idiot at that point in time. The IT world changed so much from what I knew. I never realized what control manager I was. Now I had 100 people that are working for me. I had 10 direct reports. I totally needed to trust these people. It was funny, because to the old manager, the IT department was pretty much operating as the police organization. We place things. We were Dr. No. We would tell people, "No, you can't do that. Here's the reason why."

When I took it over, we could guarantee with 100 percent reliability, we would not give you what you asked for and we will give it to you late. [laughs] My mission was to turn that around. I had a vision of where I wanted us to end up, but I had no idea of how to get there. I shared that with the people that were my direct reports. Of course, this was before I knew about gemba walks and that sort of thing, but I did know something about performance improvement.

I really just went around, trying to get an understanding of what people were doing and the problems that they were wrestling with. I really had to trust their judgment. Within two years, we totally transformed this thing into an organization where our customer community hated us, wanted nothing to do with us, to where people were coming and knocking on our doors.

I think there was one thing that I did that was pretty powerful that I don't know if this good manager or bad manager, but I told my direct reports that if a customer called me with a complaint, that when we had our staff meeting, we had a weekly staff meeting at that point in time, I was going to embarrass the person who had this responsibility.

That may not have been a mature manager. I would probably do that differently this day that I did it then. What I wanted them to do is I wanted my direct reports to start talking to our customers. After I embarrassed two people over two weeks, I never ever got a complaint call from many of our customers.

I didn't do it in a demeaning way. I focused in what she was. What I really wanted to do was to get them talking to the customers. That's what they did. When they started talking to our customers, of course, they learned, our customers learned. Our processes began to work much more effective. It was one of the most important things that we did in making this shift.

Ron: Knowing what you know today, if you had that same situation instead of, say, embarrassed would not be too respectful, what would you do different in that situation?

Michael: I would do the five Ys. I would do the five Ys of why did this happen, what's going on here, get them to start working down and thinking more critically about what it is that's going on. That would have been a more mature way to have done it.

Unfortunately, I had done a number of things at Beatrice that had worked pretty well, and I worked with quite a few people throughout the organization where things had gone well. I think my staff gave me some space and allowed me to do some silly things. [inaudible 35:32] to figure it out together.

Ron: What's interesting about that situation, sure, you can say, you shouldn't embarrass people, that's not being good. I think on the flip side, sometimes, there's this misconception that respect for people means that, "We hold hands, stand in a circle, hymns together, and things like that," where your people were not doing what was respectful to their customers, meaning communicating with them, talking to them.

Something needed to change and to jolt at them somehow into action for them to ultimately be respectful to their customers, meaning communicating with them,

talking to them. Something needed to change, and you jolt at them somehow into action for them to ultimately be respectful to your customers, right?

Michael: Absolutely. "Jolt" is a good word, because "jolt" was really what I was trying to cause to happen. Whatever it is that we do, you can always think of better ways after you've done it. It worked. We had a couple of people that left shortly after I came in. The feedback from the rest of the team was, this is a good thing. Man, [laughs] I couldn't believe how good these people were. They were outstanding.

Ron: Great. Michael, when you hear the phrase "Kaizen culture," what comes to your mind?

Michael: People get anxious when you use the word "culture." Sometimes, we try to directly go after changing the culture. Really, what the organization's culture is culture are the things we do, the way we operate. If I have a Kaizen culture, what I have, I love the strict definition of the word "Kaizen," which is improvement. If I got a Kaizen culture, what I'm doing is I'm creating an environment where we're improving all of the time.

To me, what a Kaizen culture is I got an organization that really realizes there is no one best way to do anything that even taking our manufacturing excellence toward recipients. They've reached a certain level of excellence that it is they were recognizing, but they still have a journey. If they didn't do anything else to change for the next three years, their competitors are going to catch it.

That Kaizen culture realizes that indeed, this is a journey, we're learning, we're constantly trying to do a better job of walking the [past way of doing the journey, but we're open to learning. I think in a Kaizen culture, there's a lot of humility with the leadership team to create that space for the people to go.

Ron: Michael, what's the best advice you've ever received.

Michael: [laughs] It's funny. This is another Beatrice experience. I went into a meeting with the executive team in an important project for the organization. It was really one of the first big significant projects that I had led. It was one solution that

we believed in. We thought it was a good solution, but we got pushed back from the leadership team on what it was that we were recommending.

I was thinking the leadership team was resisting this change. I was putting the burden on them rather than accepting what my responsibility was for the situation. After that was over, my manager came to me. I've learned a lot from it. I've remembered it ever since.

He said he didn't want to see me to ever come into a meeting again where I had only one solution. He said there is always three ways to do something. When you're getting this resistance in a meeting like this, there certainly could be some resistance to change, but another thing that's going on is that you're getting feedback.

You need to listen to that feedback and understand it and not do this in a confrontational way. It really changed the way that I approach everything. It changed me. From my professional life, it changed my professional life to where I was much more flexible. I think as I worked with people, it's much easier for me to listen to people who had their ideas to see what it was that could be learned. I think I've done a better and better job of doing that over the last 30 years, doing this.

Ron: What about a personal productivity habit? Do you have any that others might benefit from?

Michael: That's a challenging question, it is much easier to get advice than give advice. If you go into your room and you asked people, do they have a goal, most people will say, "Yeah, I got one." Then give the second half of the question, you say, "Is it written down?" My experience in doing workshops is most people do not have written goals of what it is that they would like to accomplish. When you don't have that, what happens is you -- it's easy to waffle. As time goes by, it's easy to rationalize. Your goal gets a little bit sloppy as you justify whatever is transpired during the last 30 days, the last six months, and the last year.

Writing down what it is that I'm trying to accomplish, I'll typically have two or three longer term goals that I'm working toward at any given point in time.

Ron: What's interesting about that is that I recently interviewed our mutual friend and my business partner, Kevin Meyer. Kevin is big on writing. In his case, he likes to write three of his most important tasks for each day, but he says that at least for him, apparently there's lots of brain and science behind this, which I have read a little bit about, that writing something literally triggers a different part of your brain than, say, typing into your electronic notepad, if you will.

There's something, I don't know, some dopamine levels or whatever that are released when you actually write something down and then actually achieve that goal that's been written down and cross it out.

Michael: It really does. It provides a focus. That's just the daily goal of what it is you're doing there with what are the key three things I need to get done today, because it's so easy to get distracted with what is going on, and do something that you think is meaningful. Occasionally, it's appropriate to shift from what you're three were, but every day when it is inter-shifting from what your three were...

It's just so easy to let this stuff drift. I'm just amazed at the discipline that elite organizations have for what it is they're trying to accomplish. I think writing it down, as you're saying, for a variety of reasons, is a good idea.

Ron: This next question, I want to change up a little bit. We've talked about gemba walk earlier. You have written an e-book. I want you to just tell us a little bit about that. Then the second part is, in addition to your e-book, can you maybe share one of your favorite continuous improvement or leadership books that you've read along your journey?

Michael: I could. It's funny how we wrote this e-book, because when you do a Google search on gemba walk, there's a bunch of stuff that comes up. I got a lot of respect for the writing Jim Womack has done and some others. Jim's got his book that he wrote about doing gemba walks. We were running a workshop for A&E, that organization we were talking about earlier.

One of our consortium companies was hosting the workshop. We had a bunch of people from around the country that were coming in to do this. When my partner, Brian, and I were putting it together, we looked on the web to try to find something

we could use to tell people how to do a gemba walk, because when you read the Womack book, it works for the external executive that's coming through to see something, but it does not work for what a first sign supervisor would be doing or daily walk activities.

We couldn't find anything. We wrote this e-book. It's only about, I don't know, 60 or 70 pages, but we ended up writing it so that we could give people a tool that they could use for doing the walks. There's half a dozen different types of walks that it is that you could be doing, depending on the walk you're doing, what are some questions that are appropriate to address, those three steps that I walked through on preparation of doing the walk and debriefing the walk. Of course, in the e-book, we get into more detail are how do you make those things happen.

Just giving people a structure and then you can take that, and you can create what it is that you need to be doing, but you get a running start from what we've laid out in the e-book. We had a couple of people who review people. We needed more people that read it, reviewed it, especially if they liked it, but the feedback from those folks that have read it has been very positive, both those that post it on Amazon and people that have just told me about it.

Ron: We're going to go ahead and link to where folks can go and check out that e-book at Gembapodcast.com/26, 2-6. If you're interested, go ahead and check that out.

The second part, Michael, is in addition to that, what is one of your favorite single continuous improvement or leadership books out there.

Michael: It's one of my leadership books I think I would point to. I just went back and looked at this. I probably read this maybe 15 years ago. It's Nelson Mandela's autobiography. It's called "A Long Walk to Freedom." It's a large book. One of the things that impressed me the most about Mandela was this person had been clearly discriminated against.

He was in prison for 25, 30 years. That's a chunk of one's life. When he came out of prison, I'm so amazed that this person came out of prison as a holistic person. As I started to learn about Mandela probably 20 years ago, I think that autobiography

had come out around then, I just wanted to read about it to learn more about somebody that could survive such a trauma like that.

When you look at that, the qualities of this guy as a leader, he's got a ton of humility. He is willing to listen. Even when he goes and he writes about the violent acts that they did, he wasn't them to do crazy violent acts. There was a rationalization. One can argue with it or not. There was rationalization that went there for what it was they were doing. His longer term goal, of course, was to get freedom for his people.

Clearly, he influenced making that happen. I like reading about people that are like the Mandela one. I forget the one about Ghandi. The Ghandi biography was also a very, very powerful book when you look at people that are just strong. When you think about performance improvement like Lean, it's amazing how few companies are truly elite in terms of doing this.

So many organizations do it, but the way they do it is very similar to where everybody else is doing it. Company A implements Lean or TQM or Six Sigma or whatever. A competitor in the industry, Company B, is doing the same thing. They both do get somewhat better.

When you do these things, you almost always get somewhat better, but I don't get better enough to different from what my competitors are doing. The last book that we wrote was called "Escape the Improvement Trap." It was really about that conundrum of "We got better. Why didn't anything change?" You didn't go nearly far enough.

The thing I like about books like the Mandela one, what we're asking people to do here isn't all that complicated [laughs] but it is not easy. It's hard. It takes a phenomenal amount of discipline. I find a lot of inspiration from reading books by competent people, what they did to be able to make that happen.

Ron: Michael, the last question I have for you is, I want you to imagine that you've gotten back in the industry and you were hired as the general manager of a company. This company is needing to definitely improve their processes and way of working but unfortunately, once you've gotten on board, you've quickly

discovered that many of the senior leaders that you're dealing with and really, some of the front line folks as well, they just aren't as enthused about your Lean-thinking mindset and ideas as you are.

With this said, Michael, what would you do and why?

Michael: I would do a lot of listening, which is certainly different from what Michael would have done when he was 20 years old. Michael in his 60s would listen. I would start with our customers. First of all, I would go and do visiting with the customers to get a feel for what's really happening with this organization in the market place, what it is that's going on.

When you come back into the organization, it will be pretty natural for people to feel that way. Some strangers then brought that if the organization gets better, the stranger is going to take all the credit. They've been trying to do the right things. The old leadership or leader wouldn't allow them to do it. It would be very common, I think, to find degrees of what it is that you're talking about. A lot of what it is you need to do over this first 30 to 60 days is listening, not judging but going through and getting and understanding, probing and starting to show some recognition that you hear what it is that people are saying.

I think then they'd begin to build some credibility. There's going to be a myriad of stuff that's there. You need to start to figure out a way, how can we get a handle on starting to work on some quick changes that there is that we can make that are going to make some difference in the day-to-day basis of what it is that's going on, that idea of starting to work towards some degree of process stabilization.

The other thing that you need to start tearing over the first couple of months is to begin to formulate a vision of where it is we're trying to go, but it shouldn't be your vision. What you need to do to get that leadership team on board is you need to start to work with that leadership team to jointly create a vision of where we're going to go and try to accomplish.

Then the proof of the pudding is going to be, do you walk the talk? Are you there really? Do you deliver what it is that you say you're going to do? Any room that you make, you better keep and stay focused. My experience is an expression that

my partner, Brian, likes to use that reasonable people, equally well-informed, seldom disagrees.

The problem in that initial environment is we're not all equally well-informed. We got a lot of biases and strong opinions. What that new person coming in needs to do is to start getting people to be more equally well informed. If you do that, then you treat people decently. They're pretty amazing.

Ron: Yeah. Exactly.

Michael: You can make it happen. That would be my approach.

Ron: OK. Very good.

All right, Michael. Well, thanks so much. Why don't we wrap this show up with you sharing some final words of wisdom. Then, why don't you tell people how they can connect with you on social media, things like LinkedIn or twitter, or whatever you might be hanging out on these days.

Michael: If you really start to get an understanding of what these Lean principles are about, you see what it is that's going on.

I think you'll only do that through participating with organizations like The Association of Manufacturing Excellence, AME, where you can get out and go see somewhere else, where they're operating differently from the way that you operate. It's almost impossible to make these changes until you start to modify your ability to see what it is that's going on, and you go to places to do that.

My first thing to do for learning is to go out and see some other places, see some things that are operating differently, and then start to think about the possibilities. It's really pretty phenomenal when you do this, almost intoxicating.

One of my first experiences with Kaizen, I was doing some work for a global technology firm, pretty much when my understanding of Lean was still Kaizen's. I'm working with the factory that's in Louisiana, and we had done a couple of Kaizen teams.

We'd made management presentations. It had all gone well. We're in the room. The end of the week I'm going to fly back to Chicago from Shreveport. I asked everybody that was under one team, "What did you get out of this week?" because I'm always kind of curious.

We're going around that room and people are talking about it. We come to this one woman. Her name is Pearly. Pearly said, "I've worked for this company for 25 years..." and she paused. Then she said, "...it's the first time they've ever asked me to think..." She paused again. Then she said, "...and I really liked it."

It's almost intoxicating because, when you do what it is you're talking about here, you can see people grow before your eyes. It is a phenomenal experience of the way that this takes place. I would encourage anybody to be doing it.

I'm all over the social media. If you did just a search for Michael Bremer on Google, I typically come up several times in the first page. I'm available for people to connect with me on LinkedIn.

I do some Twitter. I'm not a regular Twitter poster. I keep getting additional people that follow me on Twitter and I wonder where they're coming from because I might not have posted for 30 days.

Ron: They're robots, Michael. Just breaking it to you. [laughs]

Michael: I use LinkedIn on a regular basis. I found that to be a very good site for connecting people throughout North America and to some degree throughout the globe.

Ron: Yes.

Michael: Our website in the organization is cumberlandchicago.com. Cumberland, like the Cumberland Gap. cumberlandchicago.com would get you to our website. Of course, if you did a search on Amazon on how to do a gemba walk, you'd find that particular e-book. There's a couple of other things we've written.

Ron: Yes. Again, we're going to have links to everything that Michael and I have been talking about at the show notes, which people can find at the

Gembapodcast.com/26. Then, for those interested in AME conference that we talked about earlier, that's Gembapodcast.com/ame. Michael, thank you again for taking time out of your day to chat with us and I look forward to seeing you in Jacksonville and perhaps we can connect again and do another podcast down the road.

Michael: Absolutely Ron, I really enjoyed it. Thank you very much for taking the time to do this. I appreciated it and it was a lot of fun.

Ron: All right. Take care.

Michael: You too.

[music]

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