

EBOOK

Gemba Walk: The Ultimate Guide

FROM CHECKLISTS TO
ACTIVE SUPERVISION TOURS

PROACTION  INTERNATIONAL +  UTrakk





Intro

If you are interested in management methods that contribute to improving the performance of organizations, then Lean Management philosophy or Six Sigma has probably already appeared on your radar. Gemba Walk, waste elimination, Kaizen, Just in Time, 5S... a number of practices based around this great concept are currently gaining popularity. And for good reason! They are flexible and aim at generating value for the organization, eliminating non value-added activities and encouraging continuous improvement, all with minimal investment (no CAPEX).

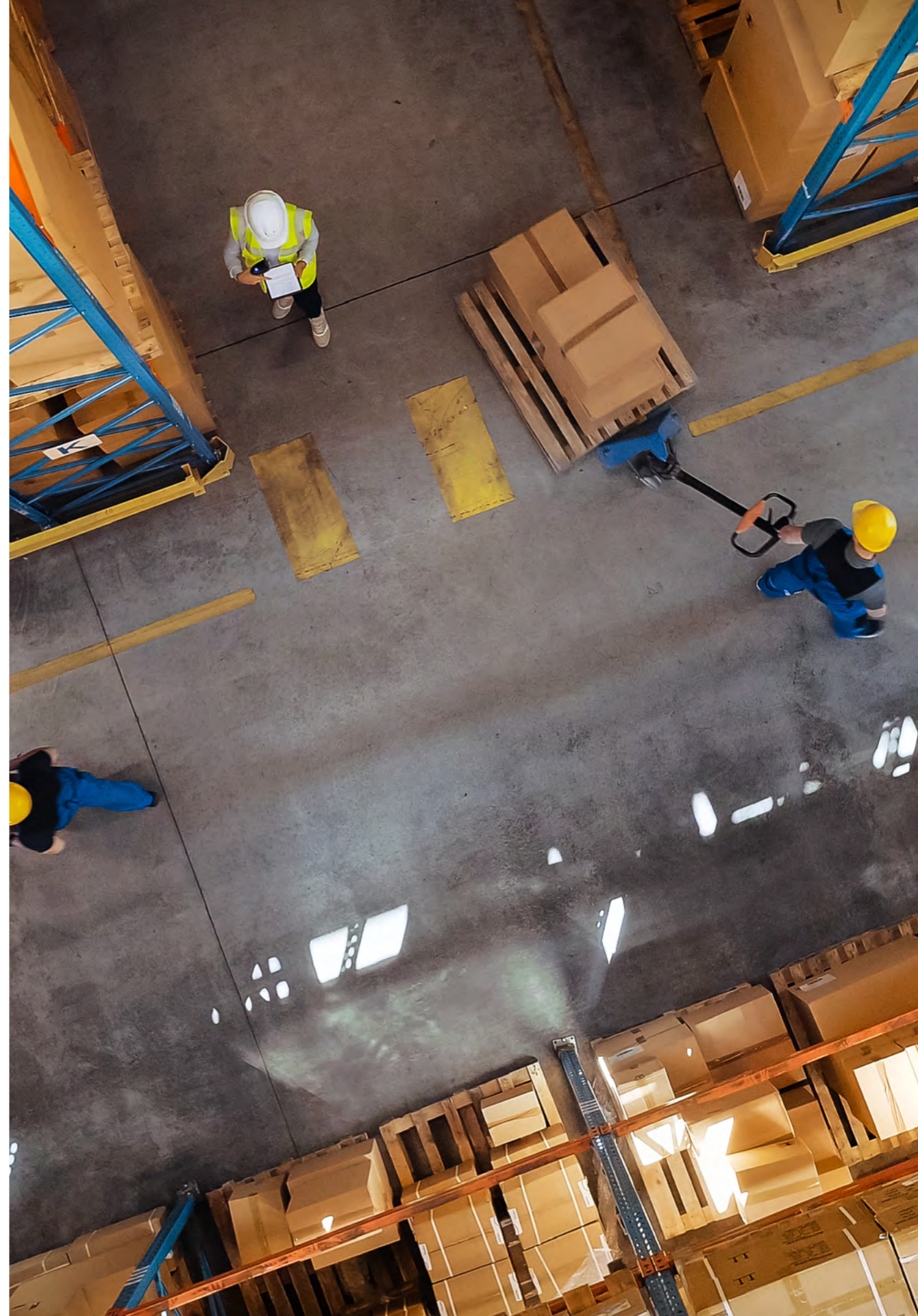
The Gemba Walk, for example, is one such practice that emerged from Toyotism and is being adopted by a growing number of organizations to help them understand the reality of their operations and optimize their processes, whether it is a production floor or administrative operations. However, Gemba Walk can (and should) be taken one step further to integrate the notion of leadership behaviors into the management of performance axes in what we call the “Active Supervision Tour.”

This guide defines this essential management practice in depth, offers you tips and tricks to carry them out efficiently and build the best checklists to drive your teams’ performance like never before.



Yves LeBrasseur
Senior Expert, Technical Processes at Proaction International.

☰ Table of contents



What Is Gemba Walk?

The word Gemba originates from the Japanese word “Genba”, which is made up of two kanji characters. “Gen” means “actual”, and “ba” means place. It literally translates to going to where the actual work happens (the “real place” or “actual place”).

A Gemba Walk is a fundamental part of lean manufacturing originating from an experience known as the Ohno Circle. Taiichi Ohno, the originator of the Toyota Production System, used to ask managers to stand in a chalk circle at the point of execution of the processes to be observed and leave them there for an extended period of time to absorb the reality of the field in order to understand it better.

Couldn't the same result be achieved by installing cameras or consulting reports?

The answer is actually no, not at all. What Ohno understood was that operations management is not a desk

job – it takes place on the shop floor, with the team members.

In this spirit, Gemba Walk elevates this observational practice into a more active mode. The supervisor is therefore responsible for monitoring the progress of production, informing employees of the objectives for the upcoming period, capturing performance gaps and taking the necessary action to resolve them.

Like other lean tools (5S, PDCA, SMED, lean six sigma), the Gemba Walk can be used in all industries for any process such as marketing operations, call centers, factory floors, shipping facilities, and warehouses among others.

This method is very effective on its own, but it can be deepened to achieve better results through Active Supervision Tours.



Why You Should Do Gemba Walks

Continuous improvement requires continuous direct observation. That is why most leaders focus on measurable performance indicators (KPIs) such as error rates, customer satisfaction scores, cost efficiency, and speed among other metrics. Consequently, Gemba Walks may be a starting point for Kaizen events as it allows for a good understanding of a problem or improvement points.

Improvement opportunities and process problems can be discovered not only by measurable performance indicators but also by those that can't be measured. That is why lean manufacturing, and more specifically Gemba Walk, is important. You need to be there and see for yourself to understand whether there are any inefficiencies or waste (mudas), find out their root cause, and what corrective action needs to happen to improve.



According to a Harvard study*, Gemba Walks improve performance because:

- **It leads to successful problem resolution** because seeing a problem in context improves managers' understanding of the problem, its negative impact, and its causes; increasing their motivation and ability to work with front-line staff and managers to resolve the issue.
- **Gemba Walk's repeated cycles of identifying and resolving problems** may create an organizational capability for improvement that reduces the cost of future improvement efforts, creating a positive dynamic.
- **Communication from front-line workers** about problems aligns managers' perspectives with customers' experiences, enabling managers to effectively allocate scarce resources among the organization's multiple improvement opportunities.
- **Managers' presence on the front lines** sends a visible signal that the organization is serious about resolving problems. This increases employees' beliefs that leadership values improvement, which in turn spurs employees to engage in the discretionary behaviors necessary for process improvement.

* Tucker, Anita L., and Sara J. Singer. "The Effectiveness of Management-By-Walking-Around: A Randomized Field Study." *Production and Operations Management* (forthcoming).

Active Supervision Tours: Toward a Human-Centered Management

The Gemba Walk technique was deployed at Toyota in the 1960s and became popular in North America between 1990 and 2000. Many of the companies across the range of industries that we have been lucky enough to work with over the past 15 years have successfully used the Gemba Walk methodology.

However, although the benefits of increased active supervision and well-established Lean Manufacturing practices are evident in these organizations, a critical dimension was missing.

Proaction International's experts have therefore evolved the regular Gemba Walk model to include human capital as a performance axis and helped hundreds of companies of all sizes to adopt active supervision tours that sustainably increase gains tenfold.



How to Make Processes People-Centric?

In order to integrate best human management practices into Gemba Walk and to master the active supervision tour, it is important to first define what is expected from a “good” floor tour:

Format

The active supervision tour is a scheduled time at regular intervals during the workday.

Employees know that their supervisor will visit them on a daily basis, for example, at 8:00 AM, 11:00 AM, and 2:00 PM, and that these few minutes are reserved for them to touch base, ask questions as needed, and bring the supervisor’s attention to issues that are affecting their work and need resolution.

Content

Each active supervision tour is an opportunity to strengthen the alignment of operations with the organization’s performance areas, priorities, and values.

Whether it is for the achievement of operational objectives (units produced, files processed or hours billed), compliance with health and safety standards, or the values of consideration and listening to employees, this moment allows all involved to experience this indispensable consistency in a concrete way.



Chapitre 2 – How to Make Processes People-Centric?

Behavior

A frontline supervisor must be much more than a person who monitors.

By adopting an ambassadorial attitude and demeanor with an engaging state of mind, the active supervision tour becomes a privileged moment. By taking a real interest in people and asking for their opinions, and by involving them in the solutions, this moment becomes a rich point of contact, a pillar for driving not only performance but also the mobilization of teams.

While Gemba Walk offers a more active way of monitoring processes with Key Performance Indicators (KPI), it is possible to adopt the same discipline towards management quality through active supervision tours.

The introduction of Key Behavior Indicators (KBI) contributes to the integration of the human factor into the performance axes of organizations and to the continuous improvement of management practices and skills.



Front line management as a vector of commitment

Without a doubt, performance management is a field sport. And since it depends largely on human labor, it is logical to consider people's commitment and well-being among the main performance axes of an organization. That is why it's time to transform your Gemba Walk into an active supervision tour, a management ritual that puts people at the heart of performance.

By involving employees in exclusive, recurring, and structured moments with their proximity managers, active supervision tours allow them to proactively discuss their activities and their impact on performance. And this practice has a major impact on employee and team engagement.

This is especially important in the context of labor shortages; when employees know what is expected of them, are consulted on how to proceed, and know that the issues they put forward to the organization result in concrete action, commitment to the organization increases, and so does employee retention.

It's time to transform your Gemba Walk into an active supervision tour, a management ritual that puts people at the heart of performance.



How to Perform a Gemba Walk?

For you to understand the process and any improvement opportunities, you should base your Gemba Walk on three key activities: go see, ask why, and show respect.

Go See

The first element of a Gemba Walk is going where the process is. It could be a checkout line, call center, shop floor, shipping facility, or any other place with work processes.

Being there allows you to gain a better understanding of the people working in your organization. You can accurately gauge whether they understand the purpose of their work, follow standard work practices, and whether all the required resources are available and are being used efficiently.

Ask Why

Instead of throwing suggestions at the problem, a good leader first seeks to understand the problem. A popular method is using the 5 why method to explore the cause and effect relationships of the problem. The method involves asking why five times to understand the nature of the problem and discover its solution.

Note: It doesn't have to be exactly five whys. You can do as few or as many as it takes to understand the problem and its solution.

Here is an example problem we can solve using the 5 why method. Let's say the milk is spoiled.

PROBLEM: THE MILK SPOILS.

- **Why?** We did not drink all the milk before the expiration.
- **Why?** We had too much milk.
- **Why?** We bought more than we needed.
- **Why?** There was a discount on bulk purchases.

Show Respect

For the people you lead to trust you enough to share valuable information that you can use to solve the problem, you need to treat them with respect. You should not use a Gemba Walk to assess performance or as a way to assign blame and point fingers.

A well-executed Gemba Walk routine makes field team members feel that their manager is making them a priority. Evidence of this is the fact that they invest several hours each day in active supervision tours to be present and available for them.

Here are the 5 basic steps of an effective Gemba Walk*:

1. Determine the critical areas and key steps in each process (where to go).
2. Determine an indicator for each key stage (what to check).
3. Carry out the tour on the factory floor using a checklist:
 - For each workstation, validate in real time the indicator identified for the process step.
 - Ask the operators if they have any issues to report.
4. Note the actions to be taken to remedy the issues.
5. Follow up on the actions taken to solve the issue.



* It should be noted that this is a semi-structured approach, which means that there is no single formula for Gemba Walk, but rather a multitude of variations inspired by the Toyota model.

Building Your Checklist

A checklist of what you would like to cover in your Gemba Walk is important even if some of the questions you ask may come up ad hoc. It structures the entire process and ensures you cover the whole value stream without missing important items.

You can even structure a general Gemba Walk checklist template as a questionnaire in a daily management system such as UTrakk to ensure all the observations and conversations are well documented.

However, a poorly structured checklist could exclude some important questions and steps, missing opportunities to capture issues and performance discrepancies to act on them. You might overlook them or have to go back and validate the points you missed.



What Questions to Include in a Checklist

The most crucial step in the Gemba Walk is to capture performance gaps by observing and questioning operation workers. To do this, you need to ask the right questions based on your performance areas.

Here are some examples you can include in your Gemba Walk question list based on your performance areas:



People:

- How are you doing today?
- Are your goals and priorities clear?
- Do you foresee any pitfalls or obstacles by the end of the day?



Quality:

- Is the product packaged properly?
- Is it the right pallet size for shipping?
- Is the weight and branch number listed on the package?



Health & Safety:

- Has there been an incident since the last Gemba Walk?
- Is personal protective equipment (PPE) adequate and available?
- Does the team have all the tools needed to do a safe job?



Process:

- Is the team following good work practices (SOP)?
- Did the team encounter any technical issues?
- Have you identified any opportunities for process improvement?



Productivity:

- Is the machine speed set to standard?
- Is the shift changeover smooth and without downtime?
- Did employees encounter any productivity issues?



Work Environment:

- Does the work environment meet standards?
- Is there debris on the floor?
- Are there pallets standing on the floor or between stations?

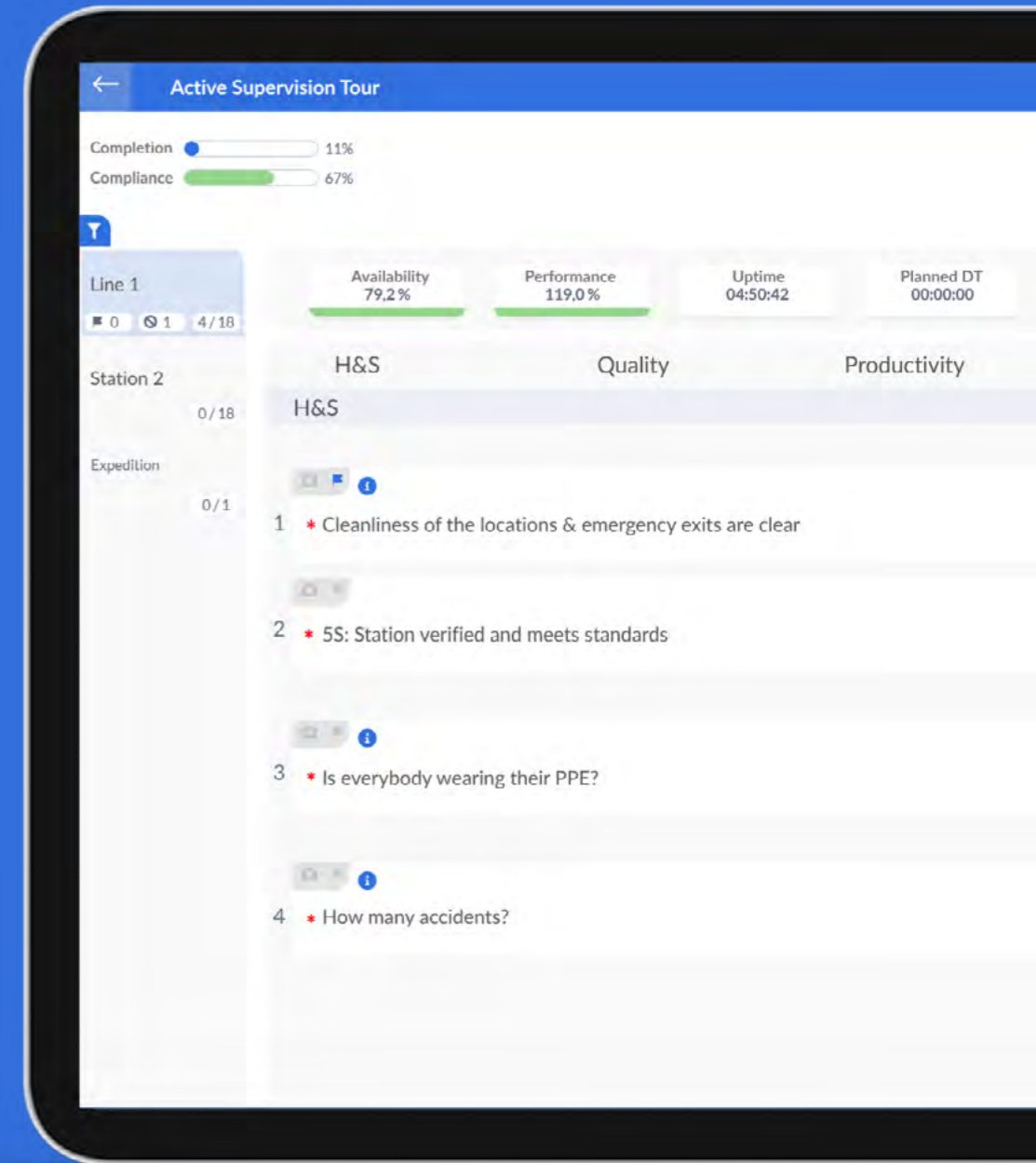
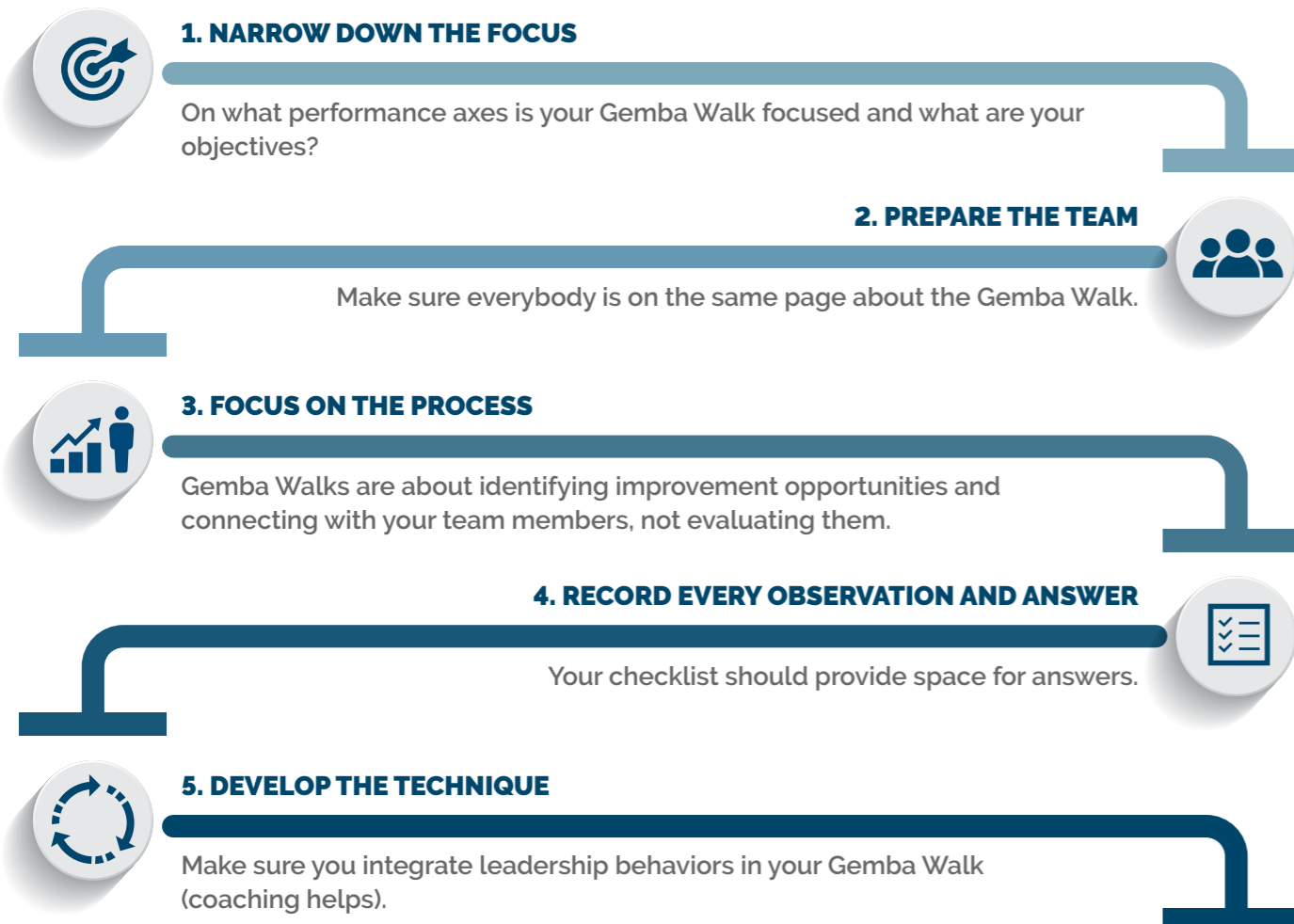


Varia:

- Do you have any specific comments?

Steps to Create the Best Gemba Walk Checklist

The sample questions above only give you a general idea of the kinds of questions you should ask during a Gemba Walk. To come up with a Gemba Walk checklist that is perfect for the specific process you want to evaluate, here are five steps to help you.



Example of a checklist digitized with UTrakk

Chapitre 4 – Building Your Checklist

1 Narrow Down the Focus

For your Gemba Walk to yield great results, you should focus on one or more themes that you want to address. This allows you to focus all the attention on one thing or to make sure you cover all the priorities of your organization.

Thus, your Gemba Walk can target only one or all the performance axes (productivity, quality, lead time, human, health & safety, etc.). It all depends on the objective:

- Analysis
- Problem-solving
- Resource requirements
- Innovation
- Any other relevant objective

This will allow you to tailor your Gemba Walk checklist to your goals and to ask targeted questions. However, a Gemba Walk is not meant for complex problem-solving. In this case, a distinct exercise is in order.

Note: Identifying standardized tracking metrics allows the organization to send strong messages about its priorities. If front-line managers of all shifts and departments systematically track health & safety, quality and productivity, work teams will be clearly aware of the value placed on these areas in the organizational culture.

2 Prepare the Team

Unless you are doing it alone, inform the Gemba Walk team about the objectives of the Gemba Walk and how to conduct it. This reduces first-time anxiety.

You should also share your checklist with them. If you ask for their input, they might be able to point out a question, detail, or flaw you missed during preparation.

3 Focus on the Process

Remember that the goal of a Gemba Walk is to identify improvement opportunities. As such, your questions should be structured to evaluate the process and not the person.

The moment a person feels like they are being evaluated, judged, or blamed, they may not be able to clear straightforward answers.

Important! This does not mean that you should not show interest in the person, quite the contrary. The gaps to be captured can be of human nature, i.e. related to the well-being of individuals, their training, their skills, and competencies, etc. After all, the Gemba Walk is a special time for team members to help them achieve their goals.

Chapitre 4 – Building Your Checklist

4 Record Every Observation and Answer

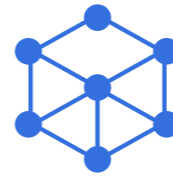
Every data point you and your team come across needs recording. Your checklist should provide space for you to record the answers to the questions. However, there are tools such as UTrakk that digitize Gemba Walks and make data entry easy. UTrakk also allows you to create an action and assign someone to handle it.

5 Develop the Gemba Walk Technique

The supervisor must now be able to execute the Gemba Walk. In addition to having a good checklist in hand, they must develop the right active supervision behaviors to provide their team with the support they need to achieve their goals. This includes the ability to mobilize team members, communicate clear objectives and regularly express recognition for a job well done, an initiative, or a good attitude.

A coach is a valuable ally in developing these skills and behaviors and then ensuring that they are integrated into daily life.



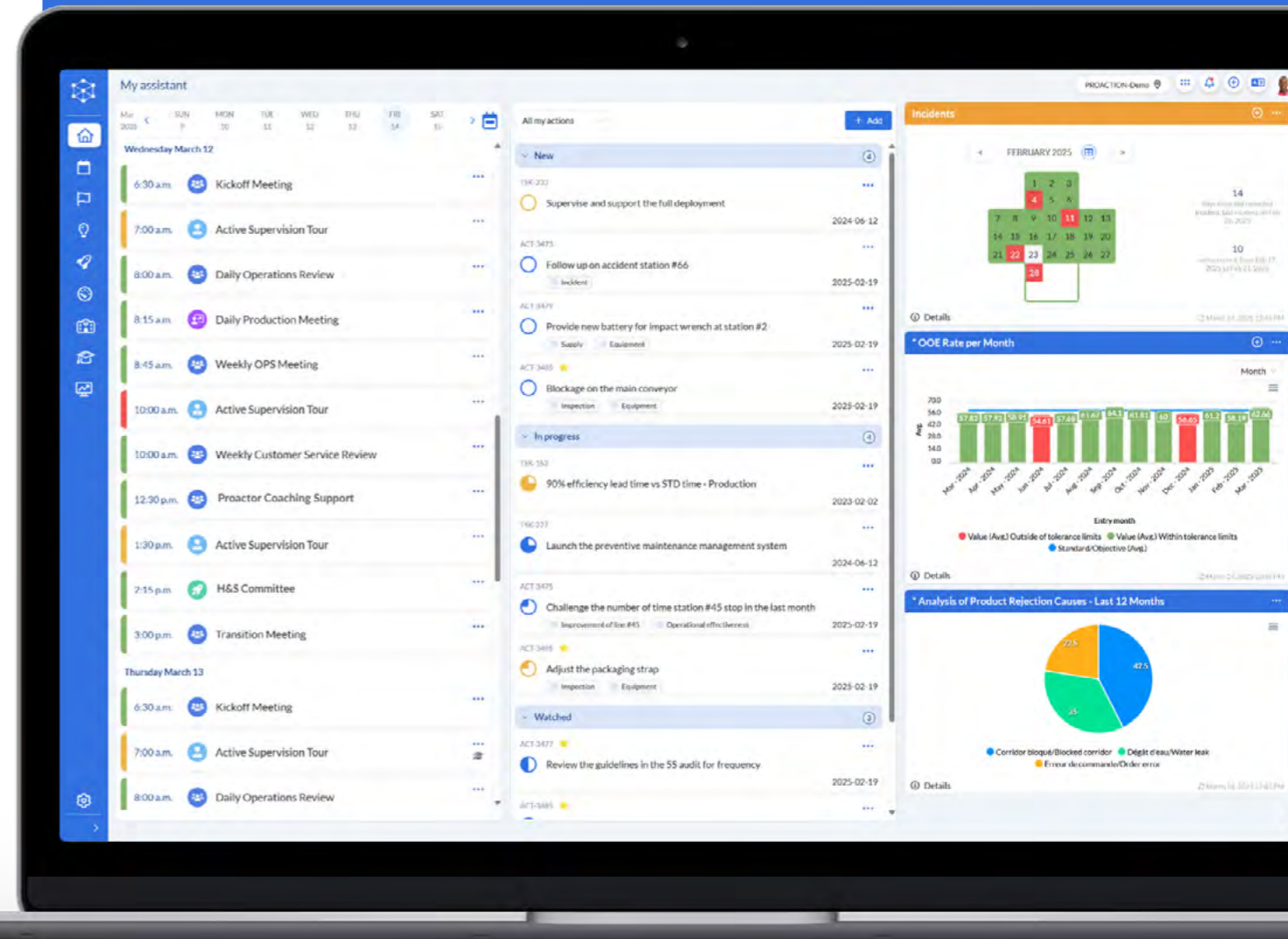


Tech Tools to Structure Your Floor Tours

To ensure that best management practices are adopted by managers, integrated into structured active supervision tours, and that their benefits are assured in the long term, it is as essential for the leadership team as for frontline managers to have the right tools. Long gone are the days of notepad and pen Gemba Walks.

Although there are several platforms which digitalize Gemba Walk checklists (such as Damasix, Shizen and Tervene), only UTrakk offers a set of tools that help managers improve in their role and put people at the heart of the organization performance management and process improvement.

With a solution that stimulates collaboration, increases accountability and ensures alignment, Management 4.0 is at your fingertips.



The Manager's Journey

See how UTrakk Can Support You – Every Day



UTrakk is on the floor with you, simplifying your management activities and boosting the performance of operations and teams.

Manager's Journey

Explore UTrakk

What Do You Do After a Gemba Walk?

After completing the Gemba Walk, the next step includes setting up a meeting. This meeting focuses on compiling feedback and the different team members' views on process improvement and drawing an actionable conclusion. Some of the things that occur during the meeting include:

- Discussing the methods used in the Gemba Walk and whether they were effective.
- Identifying the value and non-value activities in the process and eliminating the latter.
- Clarifying and documenting the discussion points and details that need follow-up on the next Gemba Walk.
- Sharing improvement views and creating an improvement plan based on the feedback and observations recorded from the Gemba Walk.
- Comparing past results to see the trends in results and implementation.
- Lastly, coming up with a follow-up plan to check how well the suggested improvements have been implemented.

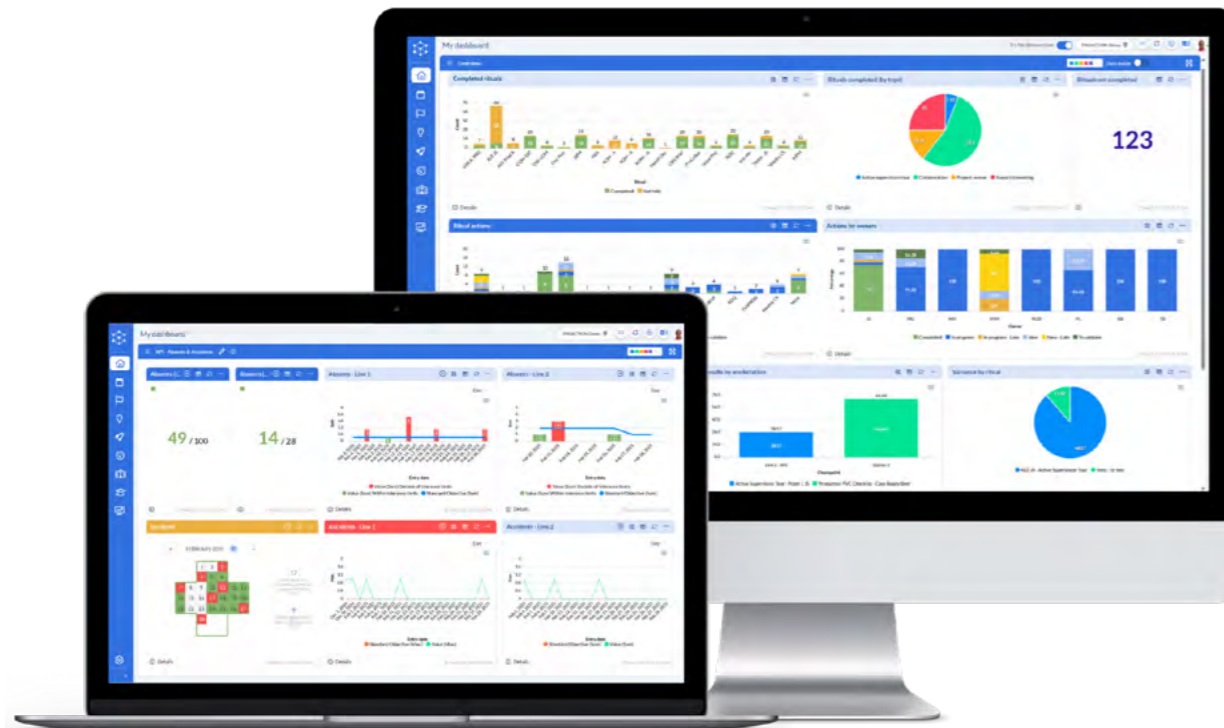
A Gemba Walk checklist is not like any other checklist. Most of them usually serve as a mere reminder. A Gemba Walk checklist plays a role bigger than that. It is the difference between a successful Gemba Walk and one that fails.



More About Gemba Walks and Active Supervision

Approaching the Gemba Walk with a checklist ensures you collect all the data you need for continuous improvement. It also ensures that you remain structured and collect high-quality data. However, there are far too many details to consider, data to collect, and forms to fill. It is impractical to walk around with that huge file. You would have to pick between an effective Gemba Walk, or using a small file.

Luckily, with a tool such as UTrakk, you don't have to make that choice. It allows you to conduct a Gemba Walk without carrying any physical forms or files. It simplifies data collection and entry so you can conduct a hassle-free Walk.



If you are looking to improve the operational and financial performance of your organization, Proaction International experts are here for you.

We will help you improve your management tools, your processes, and your communication in order to become more efficient on a daily basis. We will sit down with you and analyze your current processes and structures to come up with solutions that will result in the best productivity gains for your organization.

ABOUT PROACTION INTERNATIONAL AND UTRAKK



With over 20 years of expertise, **Proaction International** accelerates leadership and operational excellence through coaching and training of leaders and the optimization of operations. We help organizations transform their management practices and elevate their performance.

In 2014, the company launched the **UTrakk Daily Management System (DMS)** to support managers on the floor, simplify daily management, and drive the performance of operations and teams.

