

Taking the Gemba walk at SRF

Observe before taking action, says the Japanese principle of Gemba. That's what they do at SRF.

PEOPLE@WORK

Chitra Narayanan

Can you retrieve an old file from your office computer in less than 30 seconds? Or pull out a folder, a pen or stapler instantly from your office desk? At SRF, most employees can.

If there is a prize for the tidest office in India, then SRF should surely be among the front runners for it. Every single employee's desk is ordered with fanatical precision. Right down to the stapler, the pair of scissors and the planner, there is a place for each item and they are always in their right place.

It's all to do with Seiri, Seiton, Seiso, Seiketsu and Shitsuke — the 5 S principles of clearing up, arranging, cleaning, maintaining cleanliness and discipline. The Rs 3,267-crore tyre-cord-to-fluoropolymers business group run by the Delhi-based Bharat Rams was the first to bring 5 S to India from Japan in the mid-1990s. Fifteen years on, the group still follows the principle rigorously.

I am at the Gurgaon corporate office of SRF and ruing the fact that I have missed the monthly Gemba walk.

In Japan, Gemba stands for the crime scene and detectives walk around the Gemba observing and investigating everything with a magnifying glass. But in business, Gemba is the place where value is created. Manufacturing companies — especially lean manufacturing ones — do the Gemba walk, not just in their plants, but corporate offices as well. The idea is to look for waste and find ways to eliminate it.

So, every month, senior executives take a walk through the office, observing how they can do things the Kaizen way — in other words, the better way. Today, even if it may not be the Gemba exactly, I am on a walk-through of the aesthetically designed blue, white and grey office with Mukund Trivedy, head of corporate communications at SRF, and J. Ravikant, Associate Vice-President, Corporate Total Quality Management (TQM).

They describe how the office has been divided into 17 zones; each zone is audited at different times by different people. So, Trivedy, for instance, can check on Ravikant's zone and vice-versa.

The Gemba walk usually takes 40 minutes and is done by two people — they go around checking drawers and cupboards and see how common documents are stored in a zone — asking individuals to pull out some files or objects. "Your observation skills are really tested during the Gemba walk," says Ravikant.

He invites me to pull open a cupboard and I reel back at the sight of how well ordered it



is — the files are numbered and arranged accordingly. "How much time do you devote to all this and what about actual work?" you ask. "This is work," grins Ravikant. "It is just a way of working."

He points out how in their Thailand office, a set of 10 files could have a pattern to them. It could be the image of a tiger — if a file is kept wrongly, the tiger pattern is not formed — and at once you get to know that some file is out of place.

"Similarly, at the plants too, we have a lot of visual cues," he says.

The report generated from each Gemba walk is put up on a central pillar in that zone. I am horrified to see notings such as a table calendar not turned to the correct month.

"Isn't this a bit like school inspection?"

"Not at all. Everybody looks forward to the Gemba walk," says Suresh Tripathi, President, HR, SRF. "And there is no negativity involved — we don't say anything is bad, we just say it can be done better and tell them how."

As he explains, it is aligned with the company's motto of finding a "better way" to do things. He gives an example. "You go to a meeting and a pen and pad is given to you. You go to another meeting and another pen and pad is given. Suddenly, you have collected five pens and pads on your desk. Immediately, in keeping with 5S, you remove what is extra and keep it in a place from where it can be accessed by everybody."

WELL PLANNED MOVES

Walking on, I find that pinned on the board

on each person's desk is a work plan — not just for a week, but the whole year. "It's part of TQM culture that every individual starts with a plan," explains Ravikant. "5 S provides a strong platform for implementation of TQM," he says, "as it improves efficiencies, quality, safety and morale."

"One of the reasons why you might have noticed this unusual calmness around the office — no agitated voices, no stress — is the meticulous planning," explains Trivedy. "In manufacturing, unlike many other sectors where you tend to live for the day, here we can plan six months ahead," he says.

From the boardroom to the cafeteria to the basement parking lot and the backyard, I can see signs of 5 S everywhere. Even the drainpipes running along the walls of the building are painted and made to look aesthetic, while the terrace has been completely greened and turned into a lovely area that one can come to for a break. "We sometimes organise musical evenings and dinners here," says Trivedy.

At the cafeteria too there is minimum wastage of time — employees use their swipe cards on a machine which dispenses a voucher, which is handed in and you get your *thali*. Chairman, Bharat Ram, as well as his two sons, Ashish, Managing Director, and Kartik, Deputy Managing Director, often queue up and share the same tables. "Everybody is accessible," says Trivedy.

Earlier, in the boardroom and other conference rooms, I notice how the switches are numbered and labelled so you know exactly which light you are turning on.

The message is clear: Not a second is to be wasted in this office! But, then, you can't resist asking — Haven't the Japanese been overtaken in manufacturing? So, are all these practices relevant any more? Are there any productivity measures to show that these tools are working?

Ravikant rears up at the question. "These practices are relevant. Look at the way our business has grown. And although we have grown and added more facilities, we have not had to add the corresponding number of people. With 5 S we have achieved four-five times as much improvement and 5 S has itself evolved constantly," he says.

MUSICAL NOTES

According to HR head Tripathi, productivity has also improved thanks to the measures put in place to improve the self-esteem of each individual employee.

"Since not everybody can be exceptional at work and gain recognition that way, we have formed various clubs as alternative avenues to showcase individual talent," he says.

There are four clubs with their own specialisations — Symphony (music), Rangers (sports), Gurukul (cerebral games, for example, a quiz — predictably, this has least par-

A better way of working: (Top left) Inside the well-ordered SRF office in Gurgaon. (Above) Everything in its place, even in the drawers!

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tication!) and Carnation (Ikebana, art, creative activities).

Perhaps it is to do with the fact that Chairman Arun Bharat Ram is a sitar exponent and the musical tradition is deeply rooted in the family, that of the four clubs at SRF, it is the music club that is the biggest hit.

While it may be a great idea to have clubs, do employees participate voluntarily or have to be driven into it?

"Over the years, we have managed to create enough interest in these activities," says Trivedy. Over a cup of tea, Anoop Joshi, the Company Secretary who is the driving force of the Symphony club, describes how since they started in 2007, participation has grown to such an extent that they are even thinking of hiring an auditorium to hold their twice-a-year musical nights.

"These events have helped break the silos," he says, describing how employees sometimes stay back till 11 pm during practice nights.

Joshi, who has been with the company for over 25 years, says the complexion of the company has changed with growth — with three plants abroad, it's now a global firm. "And yet, through growth we have been able to keep the basic culture of the place — the values of giving respect — same," he says. The challenge is to ensure it will continue.

HR speak

AT SRF, one of the core values is "respect for people," says Suresh Tripathi, President, HR. "We believe that everyone has his own identity and we must acknowledge that identity," he says. Ask him the difference between a family-run organisation and an MNC and he replies, "I feel an MNC only works through systems. People participate through systems. In a family-owned company, there are systems, but there is also lots of individualism. You can make drastic changes suddenly. In my view, it is more experimental." For instance, he describes, "We had some 14-odd grades for many years. Overnight, we reduced that to six bands, making for a flatter organisation. Only three people left as a result of the change. Attrition was minimum."

SRF has formed an HR work group or think-tank. All the business heads and corporate HR team come together and meet once a month. "Every issue in the organisation is brought up. We discuss and debate and find out what is the best way ahead. Lots of inputs are taken from the grassroots level too."

Adding up	
Total headcount	5,500 globally
Annual turnover	Rs 3,267.36 crore
Number of employees across India	4,500, with around 600 officers