Taking the Gemba walk at SRF

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

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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 desk? At SRF, many employees can.

If there is a prize for the tidiness 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 the right place.

It’s all to do with Seiri, Seiton, Seiso, Seitou, Seiketsu and Shitsuke — the 5S principles of clearing up, arranging, cleaning, maintaining cleanliness and discipline. The Rs 3,267-crore pre-tax-to-flower specialities 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 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 for the floors, but corporate offices well.

The idea is to look for waste and find ways to eliminate it.

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 the aesthetically designed blue, white and grey office with Mukund Trivedy, head of corporate communications at SRF, and J. Ravikan, Associate Vice-President, Corporate Total Quality Management (TQM).

The description of 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 Ravikan’s zone and vice-versa.

The Gemba walk usually takes 40 minutes and is done by two people — they go around the buildings, 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 Ravikan.

He invites me to pull open a cupboard and I feel 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 Ravikan. “It is just a way of working.”

He points out how their Thai 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 control.

The report generated from each Gemba walk is put up on a central pillar in that zone. I am horrified to see notations 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 a 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 S5, 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 is part of QTM culture that every individual starts with a plan,” explains Ravikan. “S5 provides a strong platform for implementation of QTM,” he says, “as it improves efficiencies, quality, safety and morale.”

“One of the reasons why you might have noticed this unusual calmness among 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 S5 everywhere. Even the drainage pipes 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.”

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 anywhere? Are there any productivity measures to show that these tools are working?

Ravikan 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 S5 we have achieved four-five times as much improvement and S5 has itself evolved constantly,” he says.

A better way of working

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

The HR speak

At SRF, one of the core values is “respect for people,” says Suresh Tripathi, President, HR. “We believe that everyone has their own identity and we must acknowledge that identity,” he says.

Ask him what it is like to work at a family-run organisation and an MPD rolls, 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 a lot of individualisation. 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 from 14 to 3, making it 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.”