



Scott Smith

Improving Governance Through Gemba Walks

These walks help board members engage and build relationships with staff.

Hospital board members can sometimes feel isolated from the rest of the organization. Even under ideal circumstances—they receive good data and information from the senior leadership team and during board meetings have great discussions about the organization's True North measures—they may still feel disconnected, depending on the size of the organization and the type of community it serves.

One solution to mitigating the potential for isolation is to go for a walk with purpose. At St. Mary's General Hospital, Kitchener, Ontario, the board has implemented a gemba walk program.

The walks are purely strategic in nature. When performing a gemba walk, board members do not ask questions that focus on operational issues. And, unlike a traditional gemba walk, SMGH board members do not provide any coaching. Coaching and operational issues are the domain of SMGH's senior leadership team.

The purpose of these board walks is to engage directly with all SMGH staff, ask questions and make observations that test the board's work. The board categorizes its work into four areas: strategy, governance, financial focus and forward thinking.

Strategy. During gemba walks, the board looks for evidence that the organization's strategic plan is being deployed effectively.

Governance. The board also tests the effectiveness of the organization's Lean management system by using a department's visual performance control boards to determine if patients are being cared for effectively and if the team treating patients is engaged in improving processes. The ability to translate information displayed in under 30 seconds from a distance of 6 feet is an indicator of a visual board's effectiveness. Additionally, the board looks for evidence that front-line staff are allowed to perform their jobs without interference or interruptions, and that problems are being identified and effectively solved.

Financial focus. The walks help the board determine if resources are used effectively. For example, is there evidence that the organization is focusing on developing a waste-free patient flow system?

Future thinking. This practice also helps the board test the effectiveness of continuous improvement and innovation efforts. The board looks for evidence that a particular area of the organization has a strong focus

on continuous improvement and innovation.

How Does the Walk Work?

Before the board visits an area, it contacts the team members there to let them know about the purpose of the walk. Staff are also encouraged to prepare questions for the board. Upon arrival, board members ask if everyone is comfortable with the walk and confirm why they are on it.

Walks begin at one of the departmental visual boards that front-line staff huddle around and, when possible, coincide with a team huddle so board members can observe the team in action. Board members review the visual board for a few minutes before each walk to make initial observations and develop appropriate questions.

Staff are asked to talk about their department, what they do and the improvements they are proud of. These questions are followed by more probing questions to gain additional understanding and clarity. For example, when observing a measure and whether it aligns with the organization's strategy, a board member may ask, "How do you think the performance of this measure impacts the overall strategy?"

Gemba walks conclude with the board asking its final questions—such as whether the department needs additional support from the organization—and allowing time for staff to ask questions.

After the walk, board members discuss what they have learned to determine what, if any, action needs to be taken, such as follow-up questions with the senior leadership team.

Board Gemba Accountability

To properly conduct gemba walks, it is important that board members and senior leadership teams establish accountability for themselves. For board members, this means focusing on their fiduciary responsibilities and not interfering in operational issues. Walk leaders are responsible for ensuring the board asks appropriate questions without directing departments they visit to take action.

The senior leadership team is responsible for providing the board with access to all areas of the hospital and preparing leadership and front-line teams for the walks by explaining their purpose and managing expectations.

Conditions for Success

For a gemba walk program to succeed, the following conditions must exist.

First, it is important to establish a “no blame, but accountable” culture. The board is there to focus on the systems that support the hospital, patients and team members, not to find out who is at fault for failed execution. If blame exists, the board will not be able to have open discussions or build an atmosphere of trust.

The board focuses on strategy, not operations. It is important to stress this to encourage the senior leadership team and staff to help the board explore the effectiveness of the organization’s efforts. This will help the board determine what needs to be done to improve the organization’s strategic work and how it can better support operations for success.

The organization should be well-developed in terms of Lean Thinking. In particular, there should be some level of a management system in place. The management system is the organization’s common focus and provides the board with an understanding of the health of the organization. Similarly, board members should have a well-developed understanding of Lean Thinking so they know what to look for and what questions to ask.

The Results

Although SMGH’s board is still in the early stages of developing its gemba skills, it already has seen some positive results. The board has engaged in some good discussions on how the organization needs to improve its approach to strategy and

in setting goals for SMGH’s True North key performance indicators. Board members have gained a significant understanding of the mood of the organization and how they can affect it. The board is also learning where the organization needs to improve the alignment of its efforts and how to engage in more challenging conversations with the senior leadership team.

Finally, and most importantly, the gemba walk program has helped the board emerge from its sense of isolation and build some very important relationships with the teams it supports. ▲

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