



Doctor Appointments, Extreme Disappointment, and Gemba Walks – Oh My!

What can leadership do to support services more efficiently?

I recently scheduled my annual women's examination. I first made my appointment on my doctor's website and selected a date. Two days before my appointment, it was cancelled because the doctor had a conflict. I selected another date that was confirmed. Per my previous appointments, I fasted for 12 hours, but my appointment was not until 2:30 pm, so it was a long day without coffee!

I arrived at my appointment and called the front desk at 2:15 pm from my car (their new COVID procedure). I was asked to come in to fill out paperwork. This was the same paperwork I had filled out each year prior. I sat in the lounge chair by myself and waited to be called back for my vitals. I was called in for my vitals at 2:35 pm. Once I completed my vitals, I was shown back to my examination room where I put on my flimsy paper coverings. Since COVID, this office has gone paper-only so I did not have the benefit of a real sheet to cover everything.

I am normally patient, but by 3:10 pm, no one had come to check on me, much less my doctor. I could hear two women talking in the room next to me. It was very casual and loud and did not sound like the kind of talk that occurs during an appointment. I called the front desk to speak with the receptionist I had

checked in with. She graciously came by my room to speak with me in person and to explain the delay. I told her I had been waiting and asked if I was going to be seen soon. She left and came back 30 seconds later. She let me know my doctor was talking to an employee in the room next to me and said would see me soon.

Ok...so far it sounds like things for me were running late. Would there be less of delay in the morning, or would the doctor have been more aware of the time because of the time of day?

I realized I was living a real-world example of a service that would benefit from a Gemba walk...my doctor appointment.

As a woman who believes in operational and process excellence, who values being on time for a patient's appointment, or any customer experience, this experience was not one I want to repeat.

Many professionals recommend performing Gemba walks in manufacturing environments. Gemba walks are just as helpful in service environments. No matter the environment, they must have leadership support. I realized I was living a real-world example of a service that would benefit from a Gemba walk...my doctor appointment.

Scheduling and conducting a Gemba walk are relatively easy. At a basic level, a group of

people walk through each step of the process with the intention of putting eyes on the process. Participating in the walk is the real challenge. Is it better to have someone who does not know what the process output is supposed to be? Or is it better to have an expert in the process walk you through, sharing with their tacit knowledge of the process? As I say, "what you know is based on where you sit." The only person who walks the entire process of an appointment is the patient. What if I could take the doctor on a Gemba walk? Would they be happy with what they were seeing and apply corrective measures or write it off as a bad day?

Gemba walks can be extremely helpful when the actual process is occurring exactly how it normally works, with all the normal problems, just like I was experiencing in my appointment. As I was waiting all that time, I could at least go on an imaginary Gemba walk, and I thought more about it afterwards.

In my imaginary Gemba walk, I considered four steps in the process and I collected some data!

There are four basic steps for most appointments, and questions to consider in the Gemba walk:

1. Check-in

Fill out or update information. Show identification. Complete required paperwork.

2. Get vitals taken

Technician takes patient's blood pressure, temperature, and any blood work, with the occasional urine samples provided by the patient in a bathroom on the premises.

3. Conduct exam

Based on the type exam being done.

4. Check out/Pay co-pay

Make follow-up appointment. Make payment.

Each of these steps has a waiting period before and after that adds time to the patient visit.

I've had appointments in this office with the same doctor, so assuming her staff has not changed, this is what I came up with; however, there was one more assumption I made – The length of time to conduct the exam. Here are the questions I imagined I might have asked the doctor and staff to consider in a Gemba walk.

How might it be possible for the patient to fill out or update their information online once their appointment is confirmed, rather than spending time arriving early and waiting to be escorted to the room for the vitals check? By keeping physical check-in and sign-in to a standard five minutes, this could potentially save 10 minutes.

As for taking my vitals, it took five minutes and there was no wasted time during this process, although there was an unexplained delay going from check-in to the vitals room. Was the vitals room already occupied? Was my arrival not known to the technician? It may take longer if there had been blood work completed, but blood work was scheduled to be done after my physical.

Conducting the exam. In my experience, this exam takes about 20 minutes. More about that shortly!

	Check-in / Fill out documents	Waiting for vitals	Walk	Have vitals taken	Walk	Change into exam wear	Wait for doctor	Exam	Walk	Check- out / Pay co-pay	Total time
Previous time	15	15	0.5	5	0.5	2	5	20	0.5	2	65.5
Reduced time	10	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0.5	2	12.5
New time	5	15	0.5	5	0.5	2	5	20	0.5	0	53

Figure 1. Estimated time reductions with calculated "new time."

Check out/Pay co-pay can be done in about two minutes since this doctor has a standard co-pay for this appointment. Could this step be eliminated if the co-pay was paid while completing the online check-in process? Would it be easier for the office and patient if the patient paid the co-pay prior to arrival?

Calculations of time for each step, plus the wait and walk times are shown in Figure 1.

Did you catch that I said the exam did not occur? Well, that is because I waited 10 more minutes after being told that my doctor would be in to see me. Then I got dressed and walked out. If only the doctor knew what was happening from my perspective!

Gemba walks are beneficial because they provide a fact-based account of time and activities.

Conducting a Gemba walk also allows leadership to see problems and aim for reductions in waste and improve the services they are providing. I recommend that any doctor or service provider conduct routine Gemba walks at different times of the day. I was one of the last patients scheduled to be seen that day and the only one in the office at that time.

The waste of waiting creates enormous frustration for patients. It can be reduced if leadership is involved in the process and wants to provide the best service possible. A Gemba walk can identify areas of possible time reduction, but only when leadership is open to learning and following the results. The people who are involved in the process have knowledge they could share with the rest of the team to improve the overall patient experience, thereby improving the likelihood of patient retention and continued revenue. Keeping the lines of communication open and allowing for a non-retributinal discussion will ensure better patient care.