

The Age of Organizational Effectiveness Podcast

Episode 119: The Invisible GEMBA

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SPEAKERS

Sam Yankelevitch (guest), Charles G. Chandler (host)

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Charles

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Welcome, welcome to the Age of Organizational Effectiveness. This is the podcast that explores stories about organizations and their performance. I'm your host, Charles Chandler. Today we're at episode number 119, and I'm calling it "The Invisible Gemba." I'll be talking with Sam Yankelevitch, author of the book, *Walking the Invisible Gemba*. The Gemba is a Japanese word for the workplace. Sam is an expert in finding and removing sources of waste in global supply chains, where waste is rooted in communication, distance and culture. And I'm now joined by Sam Yankelevitch, who's the author of *Walking the Invisible Gemba*. Morning, Sam.

Hey, good morning, Charles, thank you very much for this opportunity.

Hey, it's great to have you on.

So we're going to talk a little bit about your books today. Why did you want to write the *Walking the Invisible Gemba*?

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Sam

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Right? So well, Charles, you know, I'm a former global operations executive. And as I, as I saw from your experience in global operations, and being out there, many of the problems that we see are hidden, I mean, you start seeing these issues about communication, culture and distance between people. Nonetheless, there are real, that we don't seem to pay a whole lot of attention to them. And as I, as I became a writer, and now a trainer and a consultant, trying to stay relevant, and aware of what's going on, I still see a lot of these issues, even in local situations, not only in the global situations, where a lot of hidden sources of problems are present, and we're just not surfacing them, we're not bringing them through the surface, really, they're nipping them in the bud and do something about them. And so, this is one of the reasons as I sat down to write about these topics, originally about Lean communication, but then I've extended into other issues, you know, that that are that are also sources of variation in our operations. Now, the reason we need to do that is because every problem has to be solved, otherwise, they just get bigger. And they repeat, you start seeing the same issues over and over.

So, I wrote the book pretty much to bring that to people's awareness, especially because from experience, you know, we typically are seeing the physical processes and these processes that are visible, really keep most and take most of our attention. And that doesn't mean that those other ones don't exist, and that we have to do something about them.

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Charles

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Yeah, I think the invisible part of this is that it's outside of your own scope. It's out in the world of somebody else's scope, basically. Right. It's invisible, because it's outside of your culture, and it's into somebody else's.

And so, we meet Mr. Onata in the book. I think he appeared in one of your earlier books. And to me, he was sort of a, you know, we join him when he's giving a workshop with many attendees, and he's sort of the guru of sorts. So, tell us a little bit more about Mr. Onata and how, how he worked in the book,

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Sam

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That's right. So, you mentioned that that came from a previous book of mine called Global Lean, that was published back in 2016 by Productivity Press. And in that book, I introduced Mr. Onata. At that point, he was a consultant for a large family-owned business that was in trouble because they went global, and they had never really put to bed some of the problems they had internally that were hidden. And so the truth behind that is that I tried to bridge Mr. Onata from that book, to the following book, which was the Walking the Invisible Gemba book. And really, he is the embodiment of the many advisors and sensei that I've been able to be in front of. And, quite honestly, you know, my work has not been in these huge companies that have unlimited resources that can hire the biggest names in the industry. I've mostly been in the smaller and midsize companies. And so, it's been, these opportunities where I do meet some of these great names and sensei that can actually mentor you and give you some advice on how to approach these invisible problems. And so, I put all that together, a lot of the wisdom that I've been fortunate to gather from these folks and put it all together into this one character. That is Mr. Onata. Yeah, he like as you mentioned, he is making a presentation. And the book is based on questions that he's asked by the audience. He shares his wisdom with the audience. And through that is kind of the lessons that come out from the book.

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Charles

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Yeah, I think he works very well in the context of the book. And he's sort of drawn in to the way he's thinking about things. So let's get into what is the Invisible Gemba? It's a Japanese word, but why should we walk it and tell us a little bit more about what it is really?

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Sam

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Right. So, the word Gemba is a Japanese word, it means the place the real place where the action happens. We're often in the lean world in the continuous improvement world. We're often taught to go out to the gemba to see reality and to really check for what is that a standard so that we can fix it. In Japan, for example, the Gemba is also the scene of the crime, the scene of where the action is actually happening. And before you do that, before you know, if you don't go there, all you have is a bunch of opinions and people looking at data without really, checking to see what's real and what's not. So for me, the Invisible Gemba became that space that even when we go and walk, the gemba, the physical gemba, workplace, you know where things happen, you can't see meanings being exchanged. You can't see culture, and how it's impacting how things get done, and how it might impact your actions and your results. So that's the invisible gemba. And really, it's just about awareness that is there. And just because you don't see it doesn't mean that it's not

impacting your results, so this is this hidden variation that that is out there, that still impacts all of our physical processes, and yet we pay little attention to it.

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Charles

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I think it focuses on the communication side of things... and the communication tends to be sort of hidden, especially when you're not in the same place as the people you're talking to, you're using phone lines or video chat or something. And you're in different worlds, basically. And so, I think you're focusing in on some kind of a transactional process that will help us make waste more visible in a sense, and zero in on how to improve that process. That's right. Yeah, you're an expert, certainly hidden waste in the global supply chains. Is this the most critical problem you see...this communication problem?

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Sam

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You know, it depends how you look at it. You know, in the last in the past few weeks, we've seen several examples of where you have a ship that is stuck in the Suez Canal, that is disrupting the supply chain. We recently had the cyber-attack on the fuel lines in Texas that affected all of the southeastern states, and the pumping. Now we're hearing about cracks in a bridge in Memphis, Tennessee, that is impacting supply chains as well. So, there's a lot of, I would say, natural and manmade disasters that I still think are going to be impacting our supply chains, you know, and we have tsunamis and volcanoes. For me, the biggest issue surrounding this, how I see this is the word uncertainty. You know, we live in a VUCA world, where uncertainty is really one of the key items. And for me, if we don't pay attention to the communication portion of it, in other words, when things happen, how do we jump in to communicate to mitigate the situation? And even before that? How are we as supply chain members communicating before that, to establish some kind of a failure mode effect analysis, looking at risk, and seeing how to mitigate these things? You know, the bottom line is that I think supply chains are so focused on efficiencies, we're still fighting about who's going to hold us up the, you know, the additional inventory of backup to, to offset one of these situations, nobody wants to pay for it, because we're all focused on efficiencies. And then when the time comes, and we're hit by these sudden issues, we have fights as of, who's who's gonna pay for this? Who are we going to sue to, to recover? And that's what we end up focusing on. And for me, it's really acknowledging that there is all these uncertainties in the supply chain.

By the way, just as a key point that gemba for a lot of people used to be inside four walls inside your shop floor where you can actually get out of your office and walk the shop floor. I think you hit the nail on the head, Charles. It's the big supply chains. It's the projects that go around that. And all of these communication culture and distance issues are definitely a big important factor that we need to include in the solutions to make sure that we don't, you know, that we're not in deep doo doo.

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Charles

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So, when you have a container ship stuck in the Suez Canal, how do you walk that gemba?

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Sam

10:46

Oh, exactly. How do you walk that gemba? And I asked that quite often. How do you walk your supply chain gemba. It's mentioned in in a an an article in AME think it's called magazines called Target. I think that's what they published. And I back in 2008, or maybe earlier, they talk about this situation where all of our processes are now dispersed. And when you have all these dispersed processes, you cannot walk them and you need communication, but not just you need really effective, accurate, timely communication, to be able to get things to happen. And I think we're living this right now where our gemba really has become bigger than just the shop floor. So as you ask, how do you walk that? And I think it's not feasible, and therefore communication has become a lot more important these days than then maybe we considered it was before.

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Charles

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Yeah. Well, you know, I think we're all influenced by our experience over the years. And so sort of what was the first thing that attracted you to that area that reveal the invisible Gemba?

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Sam

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Yeah, good question. I have to say, I'm born in Colombia. I left at a very early age and started traveling the world. My family left, we first ended up in French Canada. After that, we ended up in the Middle East. Then I studied in Texas, and University of Texas at Arlington, where I became an industrial engineer. And then I flew back when I graduated to help manage the family business in Colombia, which was an industrial operation. There I started traveling to buy equipment, machinery materials. So when you're when you have this global perspective, I think you've lived that as well, Charles's, some things become extreme. So, communication becomes very extreme, because you have all these nuances, even though people speak English, or even if you speak their language, everybody understands things in a different way. I started finding that there was a lot of ways in communication even and I'm not talking about verbal communication. Even when we were we were, I mean, we had fax machines at one point in time, before the internet, and we used to send prints and specifications for somebody to produce some piece of equipment or, or some components. And it was never right. You could even communicate via, via prints and specifications. There was always that situation where miscommunication and misunderstandings, created opportunities for waste.

I left the industry back in 2013. When I was managing a German based, tier2 in an automotive company, here in the US in Greenville, South Carolina, and since then, for me, it was even inside this company, in the 21st century, we had all of these communication problems internally, and with our suppliers. And all of these really accounted for a lot of the systemic causes that kept on repeating problems. When I left the industry, I started writing about this and blogging and built a couple of LinkedIn learning courses that are up on that library LinkedIn, that address this, address this issue. And I guess the bottom line, or I guess, in a nutshell, I might say that it's, it's one of these things where, from this from these extreme situations in global situations, I see that we never saw, you know, we haven't solved it then. And it's still in local situations, very prevalent, that you see these communication issues pop up as sources of problems.

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Charles

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Yeah, you know, what I've come to believe is that all these various tasks that were differentiated and farmed out to the global supply chain, to make them you know, nominally more efficient they Create a problem when you have to take the outputs from those differentiated tasks and bring them back into the main supply chain. Because as you say, you know, base waste comes from the lack of communication, and then the extreme distance and the cultural differences, and all these different areas. So when we have to bring these tasks, the outputs from these tasks back end to the main supply chain, and then make them integrated into that process in a way that gives them the most value for the end users. There are certain rigidities and everything that creep into the process.

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Sam

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Yes, exactly. That's how that's how I see it as well. Yeah, and you're right. I mean, how do you, you know, integrating them at first, you really have to somehow make them visual, you know, make these things visible, so that you can, , bring them into focus and make sure that everybody's actually including them in the in the processes? That's right.

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Charles

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So, are there other invisible waste out there that that we need to be aware of? That? Maybe it's the subject of your next book? I don't know. But,

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Sam

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I don't know how much the subject of my next book, but I, I've been training companies now, most virtually. And lately, I was able to get back out there, now I'm fully vaccinated, and was able to do some face to face training. I'm finding one of those, I don't know, if you can consider this one is hidden. But this role confusion, roles and responsibilities are not clearly defined in a lot of the organizations I'm visiting. And people are subjected to work just based on a job description. And then when situations come up, it's like, well, who's supposed to be fixing this, who's responsible to solve this problem? And they're not doing the basic the basic, RACI you know, RACI matrices are having conversations of, of who's, you know, who's responsible, who's accountable, who should be consulted and informed. And I see that as a major source of variation in companies. I'm going to probably include that, but I don't know if I'm going to write a book around that. I am going to be doing some training around that. And including that as one of the sources of variation for sure. Because it's, it's notorious. And I, it's strange, because it's the 21st century, and you would think something as simple as doing you're RACI, which is a very basic meat and potatoes process, really no who's on first, and who's on second, and who should be doing this and that, but it's not happening. So definitely, that would be one of the other invisible sources of waste and variation that I'm that I'm seeing.

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Charles

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Yeah, let me let me ask you to explain RACI a little bit more, a lot of our listeners are not, right. The quality movement, but they're, they're more generally focused. So, tell us a little bit more of okay.

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Sam

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Yeah, RACI is a, I would call it a process that will identify clearly for any task that has to be accomplished in interdependent situations, who is responsible? Who are the people responsible for actually doing the task? who is who needs to be informed, who needs to be consulted. And you always have to have somebody that is accountable person, the buck stops here. And the interesting thing is, when you're doing these RACI matrices, who establish that to make it clear for everybody, those conversations are enlightening, because this is when just having the conversation, these things come up to the surface and say, oh, I didn't know that you did this. And you know, just in the conversations, you really gain quite a bit. But that's what RACI is all about is really a very basic process, you can go into a very deep, it works in project management that works in operations. And I'm sure that there's applications for it in the supply chain as well.

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Charles

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So, we're coming to the end of our time here. But is there anything we haven't talked about that you'd like to leave us with?

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Sam

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Well, really just don't ignore these things take responsibility and ownership at every level for these invisible sources of waste, because if you don't, it's just gonna get worse. And, you know, I would hate for folks to continue to experience frustration and very high costs associated with these things without paying attention to them. And then often people ask me, well, how do you get started? And I think that when you're doing your what I mean in my world, because it is a quality and continuous improvement world. We often tend to use the tools to do our cause-and-effect analysis and one of those tools that is very popular is the fishbone diagram. And if you just anybody that is not in the trade, if you just Google Fishbone diagrams, you'll understand how easy and visible and visual these things are and how helpful these are to, to start naming the problems and start seeing what the potential contributing causes are. And when we do in our work, or in my work, I go in there and add a bone on the fishbone represent communication. And from there, break it down into smaller bits. And you know, what exactly about communication might have contributed to your problem. And you start talking about the specific issues and these could be language issues, such as terms, idioms or acronyms, you know, acronyms are horrendous, and very risky. elements in our language, that can create a lot of problems. Start with the basics, put those up on your Fishbone diagrams, use them in your in your cause-and-effect analysis. Just be aware that they are sources, and you should include them in your problem solving.

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Charles

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We've been talking about your latest book, Walking the Invisible Gemba. I know you have other books, how can our listeners find out more about what you have out there?

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Sam

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I think the best way is to connect with me on LinkedIn, I am quite active on LinkedIn. I mentioned earlier, I am a LinkedIn Learning instructor. I have a series of courses out there that are very related to this subject of communication, culture, problem solving in interdependent situations. You can find my books on Amazon, if you just search my name, Sam Yankelevitch. I have a website, also Samyankelevitch.com. You can find me there. And I would love to connect and start a conversation with any of you and address any questions you might have.

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Charles

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Okay, great. I will have some details in the show notes that can guide folks out to some of that. But it's been a great pleasure having you with us today. Sam, thank you very much. Thanks so much for coming on. And that's about it for this episode. Join us again next time when we'll consider more stories about organizations and their performance, not just for themselves, but for the common good. And the meantime, you can access all of our podcast episodes at our website at www.ageofoe.com. And that's all... so long for now.

Podcast Episode 119 is now live on all outlets, including iTunes, Spotify, etc.

Here is a direct link: <https://www.ageofoe.com/119-the-invisible-gemba>

Join Sam on LinkedIn: www.linkedin.com/in/samyankelevitch

You can also learn more about today's topic by watching one of [Sam's LinkedIn Learning](#) courses.