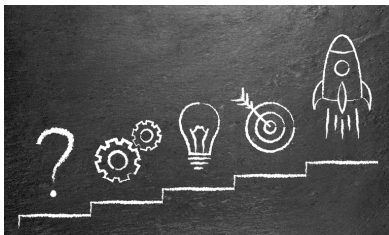


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Looking Right at the Essence of TPS (<http://blog.gembaacademy.com/2018/02/05/looking-right-at-the-essence-of-tps/>)

By [Jon Miller](http://blog.gembaacademy.com/author/jon-miller/) (http://blog.gembaacademy.com/author/jon-miller/) • February 5, 2018 •
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(<http://blog.gembaacademy.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/best-in-class.jpg>) My friend Reiko Kano began her career as Taiichi Ohno's interpreter thirty years ago. She then supported Ohno's disciples, the Shingijutsu consultants, for decades. She recently [wrote a book](https://www.amazon.co.jp/o/ASIN/4835638050/toyokeizaia-22/) (<https://www.amazon.co.jp/o/ASIN/4835638050/toyokeizaia-22/>), about her experiences. One of her stories resonated with me in particular.

In the late 1980s the world was just beginning to take note of Japanese manufacturing, drawn to buzzwords like QC circles, kanban, just-in-time and kaizen. Teams of American executives visited Japan hoping to see best-in-class practices. These visits featured bright and clean electronics factories, the Nissan plant which was full of shiny new robots and automation at the time, and other examples modern and high tech.

One visit included a Toyota plant that Taiichi Ohno had recommended to the group. This plant featured people working amongst old, well-worn machines in what were by comparison, dull and dingy conditions. The group expected to see cutting-edge manufacturing technology. Instead, they saw a humble plant with evidence of a stingy capital budget.

One of the American executives on this study group was so disappointed with the Toyota plant that he wrote Ohno a letter to that effect. Taiichi Ohno's reaction to reading the letter was, "He was looking right at the essence of TPS and he missed it."

This story struck me because it was as true 30 years ago as it was 10 years ago when I was organizing similar benchmarking visits to Japan. There were a couple of occasions when a tour group member just couldn't get over the lack of safety glasses in the plants, the age of the machines, or the limited breakfast options at the hotels, convinced by such things that they had nothing to learn on this trip. We adjusted by setting expectations of what they will see before setting foot in the plants, and helping them make sense of it afterward. What did you look at? Why? What surprised you? What does this tell you about the thinking behind what you saw? What things would you like to adopt in your organization? What would it take to do that? And so forth.

The leaders on a factory visit aren't really coming to "see" best-in-class. Seeing is a means to understanding, to developing a vision. But even understanding is useless without action. Perhaps they are seeking evidence to give them courage to act, to overcome mental obstacles keeping them from leading others towards world class. It is important for the leader on a benchmark visit to be as clear as

possible on this point, otherwise they may miss the answer staring them in the face.

As thirty years ago, so today, when people ask for recommendations for lean tours, “You know, a world class facility where our leadership team can see best-in-class lean culture with engaged employees in a highly variable demand and complex product mix environment while leveraging IoT,” preferably within driving distance. That’s all good, a delight all around when we can accommodate. But from now on, I’ll have to find a polite way to ask the question, “If your leadership team was looking right at it, would they know?”

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