

02

THE HERO SERIES · EPISODE 02

Go and See: Strategy Is Tested Where the Work Is Done

Every strategy reaches the front line eventually. The question for a chief executive is whether it arrives as intended, and whether anyone at the top would know if it did not.

Walk the rows



STARRING YOU, AS
CEO / President

THE HERO SERIES PRESENTS · EPISODE 02

STARRING **YOU**, AS CEO / PRESIDENT · GUIDED BY COMPASS PERFORMANCE



YOUR STORY, AS
CEO / President

COMPLEXITY THE REPORTS DO NOT SHOW

Walk the rows

A gardener does not judge the garden from the window.

The story in four acts

I

THE SITUATION

The view through a filter

Board packs and dashboards compress thousands of daily decisions into a few dozen indicators. Problems arrive late, explained and averaged on the way up.

III

THE SHIFT

Go and see, front to back

Follow one transaction for a customer that matters, with the people who do the work. Fix nothing on the walk.

II

THE TENSION

An untested strategy

Direction meets the real constraints of the work. If they are invisible at the top, the organization absorbs the gap through overtime and exceptions.

IV

WHAT CHANGES

An executable strategy

Less debate about whose numbers are right, more about what to change and how a choice will land on the front line.

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The aim is to see the system, not to evaluate individuals.

Three signals to listen for on the walk

Official vs. real

The gap between the official process and the real one

Effort spread evenly

Equal care for unequal things: a marginal account, a long tail of variants

Decisions that wait

Approvals and clarifications that signal unclear decision rights

Signals the complexity is showing in the work long before it shows in the ledger.

The view from the top remains essential. It is never enough on its own.

THE FULL STORY

Most chief executives receive their organization through a filter. Board packs, operating reviews and dashboards compress thousands of daily decisions into a few dozen indicators. That compression is necessary; no one can run an enterprise by watching every transaction. But it carries a cost that is rarely priced. By the time a problem appears in a monthly review, it has often been visible to someone at the front line for weeks, and it has been explained, softened and averaged on its way up.

The discipline that addresses this has a plain name. In the Toyota Production System it is *genchi genbutsu*, go and see for yourself, and the place where value is actually created is the *gemba*. The idea is not that executives should supervise the front line. It is that judgment about the business should be calibrated against the work itself, not only against reports about the work.

Why reports are not enough

Reports answer the questions someone thought to ask. They are excellent at showing whether a known measure has moved and poor at revealing what no one has measured: the workaround that keeps a key account served, the approval that adds days to every quote, the specification that sales promises and operations cannot build without rework. These are not failures of reporting. They are the natural limits of any summary.

The strategic consequence is subtle. A chief executive sets direction on the basis of how the business appears in aggregate. The direction then travels through functions, each of which translates it into its own priorities. Somewhere in that translation the strategy meets the real constraints of the work. If those constraints are invisible at the top, the strategy is not so much wrong as untested, and the organization absorbs the difference through overtime, exceptions and quiet reprioritization.

Walk the flow front to back

A gemba visit is most useful when it follows the customer's experience rather than the organization chart. Front-to-Back 80/20 starts outside-in, with a simple question: for the customers and offerings that produce most of the value, what actually happens between the first conversation and the cash collected? Walking that path, one order, one service request or one project at a time, shows where work waits, where it is handed between functions, and where effort goes to activity that contributes little.

Choose one representative transaction for a customer that matters to the strategy. Follow it, physically or through the systems, step by step, with the people who do the work explaining what they do and why. Do not fix anything on the walk. Ask what made today's work harder than it needed to be, what they would stop doing if they could, and what they have learned to work around. The aim is to see the system, not to evaluate individuals.

What to listen for

Three signals repay attention. The first is the gap between the official process and the real one. Every organization has both, and the size of the gap shows how far the formal design has drifted from the work.

The second is effort spread evenly across unequal things. When a team describes giving a marginal account the same care as a core one, or carrying a long tail of variants through every step, the cost of complexity is showing itself in the work long before it shows in the ledger.

The third is decisions that wait. Work that pauses for an approval, a clarification or a missing input usually signals unclear decision rights rather than slow people.

Turn observation into a decision rhythm

Going to see is a habit, not an event. A single visit produces anecdotes; a regular cadence produces evidence. ARC gives the practice its shape. Analyze what was observed alongside the data the leadership team already reviews. Refine the few changes that would matter most, and decide who owns each. Commit to dated actions, then return to the same flow to see whether the work has actually changed.

Two cautions keep the practice honest. A chief executive's presence changes what people say, so the visit must be safe for candor: no one is penalized for describing a problem, and people see the leader act on what is learned. And the chief executive should not become the fixer of every issue observed. The purpose is to strengthen the system the leadership team owns, not to route more decisions through the top.

What changes when leaders see the work

When leaders regularly see the work, the conversation in the boardroom changes. There is less debate about whose numbers are right and more about what to change. Strategy discussions acquire a texture they otherwise lack: leaders can describe how a choice will land on the front line, which capacity it will consume and what will have to stop. That is the difference between a strategy that is approved and one that is executable.

A gardener does not judge the garden from the window. They walk the rows, see which plants are thriving and which are crowded out, and decide what to tend next. The view from the top remains essential. It is never enough on its own.

TRY THIS · ABOUT 120 MINUTES

One transaction, front to back

With two or three members of your leadership team, about 90 minutes on the walk and 30 minutes to debrief.

1. Choose one customer that matters to the strategy and one recent transaction for that customer.
2. Before the walk, each leader sketches how they believe the transaction flows and how long it takes. Keep the sketches.
3. Walk the transaction end to end with the people who do the work. At each step ask: what makes this harder than it needs to be, what would you stop if you could, and what do you work around?
4. Record every handoff, wait and approval. Fix nothing during the walk.
5. Compare what you saw with your sketches. Where was each picture wrong?
6. Choose one change, name its owner, and set the date you will walk the same flow again.

If your sketches matched what you saw, your reporting is serving you well. If they did not, the gap is the agenda.

YOUR NEXT STEP

A confidential discovery conversation

If the view from your reports and the view from the work no longer agree, a confidential conversation is a place to think through which flow to look at first and what to do with what you find. It is a conversation, not a proposal.

Schedule a Conversation: meetings.hubspot.com/steve-kopecky · skopecky@compassperformanceinc.com

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