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Guest was Ron Pereira

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# Want to Practice Lean? Try Gemba Academy

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## ***Transcription of Interview***

**Joe Dager:** *Welcome everyone. This is Joe Dager, the host of the Business901 Podcast. With me today is Ron Pereira. He is one of the founding partners of the Gemba Academy and has over 15 years experience in various manufacturing, supply chain, and senior leadership roles. Ron has held the titles of process engineer, engineering manager, master black belt, and director of manufacturing & continuous improvement. He has also launched the popular LSS or Lean Six Sigma Academy blog which has since been rebranded and serves as the Gemba Academy's blog now. Ron, I would like to welcome you and could you give me a quick history?*

**Ron Pereira:** Well, thanks for having me on.

**Joe:** *A quick history of the Gemba Academy and how it originated.*

**Ron:** On March 2009, we started the company. So this is coming up on our 7<sup>th</sup> birthday, so we always do a really nice promotion in March. So if you're listening to this in March, come over to [gembaacademy.com](http://gembaacademy.com), and you can take advantage of our birthday. Our history is kind of funny. I had a traditional job back when we started Gemba Academy. I was serving as

you mentioned there as the director of manufacturing and continuous improvement for a multi-billion dollar company. I had to travel a lot, and I mean like Executive Platinum by March every year, or something crazy like that. And I've got a bunch of kids and a wife and all the rest of it and so, really, I loved my work, but I hated the travel.

I'm passionate about continuous improvement and teaching others about it and so I approached my now business partner John Miller and Kevin Meyer, who's also my business partner, there's three of us, about starting an online training business. And none of us really knew anything about anything to do with videos. Kevin was definitely in the online world at that time. Back then he was selling some PowerPoint and what not and we all had been blogging. We all three had blogs that had a pretty good following, but we figured out how to make videos and we kind of bootstrapped the company, and we had a 12-video value stream mapping course that we've since rebranded, so you can't even see those original videos anymore; they were pretty bad honestly. But we put it all together, Kevin built this Website, and we just turned it on in March of 2009. We didn't know what to expect and low and behold; we sold a few things, and we were like, hmm, this is interesting. And so we just started making more content and taking care of customers as best as we could, and we slowly built the company.

About a year into it, I left my job, my day job if you will, to run Gemba Academy full time. I guess I was the first full-time employee. Now, we have 13 full-time employees and John, and Kevin have joined the company full time, and it's just been a tremendous ride. It's such a huge blessing. I don't even feel like it's a job at all. It's just my professional passion in life.

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It's just been an awesome journey, and we've got lots of really fun stuff planned for the future as well.

**Joe:** *Well, it's just what you do, right?*

**Ron:** Exactly, exactly.

**Joe:** *I can kind of remember you releasing an audio program if I remember correctly on Lean or something in those real early days. It was like an audio book.*

**Ron:** Yeah. Back then, well you mentioned the LSS Academy blog, that was my personal blog that I had started. John and Kevin obviously had been blogging a long, long time before I had and I kind of looked up to those guys. They were these experienced bloggers and Mark Rabin as well, and yourself have been blogging for a long time. I started this blog, and I started getting a decent following which was kind of crazy. I never expected that. But yes, I just took a bunch of old articles and I kind of packed it into an eBook kind of thing and then I just thought one day, I wonder if people just want to listen to it. So I sat down, Lord knows Joe how I did it because I knew nothing back then, and I somehow recorded it and got it into kind of an audio book format and included that as well as one of the offerings, but yes, that was a long time ago.

**Joe:** *Yes, I remember that, and I thought you did a decent job. Talk about that, 2009, you were practically online before online training was really popular. Your first course you*

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*mentioned was Value Stream Mapping? How did you market yourself back then? Was there that many people even on the Web back then?*

**Ron:** Yes, you know we had about 5000 page views a day. No, I'm just kidding. No, you know, like I said, we all three had blogs, and I think that really helped us. John and Kevin, in particular, had thousands and thousands - they really truly did - of readers every day coming to visit their blogs, and LSS Academy was really growing as well. I don't think it was quite as popular as those two guy's blogs back then, but it also had a really nice following and really good interaction. Back then, blogs were I would say more popular than they seem to be now. Most people go to LinkedIn for their communication today but back then, we'd get 30 to 40 comments on articles that I would write. We had a really nice, little community back then.

I think that was a big reason for our success is because we really put a lot of effort and sweat if you will, into adding value before we started a company, and I think that's where a lot of people go wrong when they launch companies are they just think they're going to turn a Website on, and they're going to get rich. It doesn't work that way. We put a lot into our personal blogs and then from a marketing perspective, obviously, we just told our readership about what we were up to, and those were a lot of our early customers were folks that have been following us in the blogging world. We've never spent a lot of money honestly on marketing or anything like that. We've just always tried to add value; so if it was social media, or we've always had kind of a newsletter and so we just work real hard to add value. Obviously, we had you on the podcast last week. It was a very popular episode by the way.

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Thank you for doing that.

We just try to give back and then people find us that way, and word of mouth is obviously as you know a huge part of company success, and we get a lot of referrals and a lot of repeat business. Obviously, people who leave companies and who were using Gemba Academy and they go to a new company, and they start using us there, so we especially love them. That's kind of how we did it back then and how we really continue to build the company today.

**Joe:** *Well, I think you said a key there, that I don't want to underestimate the fact is that you had an audience and built a product for an audience, versus having a product and then go and find an audience.*

**Ron:** Exactly. Big difference.

**Joe:** *It's a huge difference. That's a great lesson for people to really understand because rather than finding a product market fit, I don't know if it will work when I say it backward, but having a market and finding product fit is much easier.*

**Ron:** To put it in perspective, when I first started my LSS Academy blog which as you mentioned, we kind of converted into the Gemba Academy blog now that all of us write on, but back when I first started that, there was no money or anything about that, but I was passionate about this stuff, and so I literally blogged daily for over a year, and I didn't miss. Not on weekends, but Monday through Friday, I never missed. And so I was just pouring my

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brain, and everything that I knew into this blog and I think people recognized that this guy is serious about what he's talking about, and I had been practicing for quite awhile so I knew a few things, and I was able to add value. And John had been doing it long before that, as did Kevin. None of us were fly by night guys, so I think that really helped us.

**Joe:** *Let's go back and see how has training developed over these years? What you're delivering now is certainly much different than the seven or eight PowerPoints that you started with in your audio book back then. What's been the major change in the way you deliver content now? Is there?*

**Ron:** Oh yes, big time. First of all, back then, I did all the editing in the very beginning. I learned how to do it. I mean, I was okay. I could kind of hack it together but obviously, we've got a team of editors now, and they are far better at editing than I ever was. And so we've gotten better technically, right? Like our equipment, I think I only had like a \$200 camera when we started the company. It was literally like a tape-based camera that popped and one of those mini DVD tapes. Do you remember those, Joe? And so we just kind of like I said bootstrapped it, and it was just money out of our own pockets and we just all banded together, and we just figured it out, and we built it up; so obviously our team has evolved.

Now as from a content perspective, I'd like to say that our content from day 1 was really solid, namely because I had John Miller. He's one of my good friend and business partner, so I'm a little bit biased, but I believe he's the brightest Lean thinker alive today. I truly do. I mean he is so, so smart and so he's always been behind the scenes. When I would put

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some stuff together, I'd send it to John; he'd send it back and say 'Try again.' And so I've learned so much from John, and Kevin as well. Kevin is very knowledgeable about the business side of things and on things like Lean Accounting or whatever; he's extremely strong. We've had just really good content I think from Day 1. I mean I guess our content is better now. We got better at delivering it obviously.

We've added something over the last few years that's been really powerful, and that's what we call our Gemba Academy Live Episodes, and that's where we go visit companies now. In the beginning, it was like, please let us come. Can we come? People are approaching us and asking us to come. It's very, very fun and it's been a huge part of our offering because we have all these teaching videos like how to do 5S; any Lean tool you could imagine, we've pretty much covered it. What we didn't have up until a few years ago was people actually doing it. I don't mean swooping in for a 20-minute DVD on what quick change SMED some company. What I mean is we'd go into the company and say, tell us about where you've screwed up or what have you struggled with, or tell us about your success and so forth. So these are real-life stories of companies who were on the journey, and that's been a big, big addition to Gemba Academy. It's actually some of our most popular content now, is all the live footage that we capture.

I don't know if that answers your question, but we've gotten better. I've gotten better at delivering content. In the beginning, it was like, whoa, this is difficult, you know like talking into a camera but now, it's pretty easy for me to do. We've got other folks like Steve Cain on our team and even Jennifer Scott now is starting to do videos for us, so we've got other

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folks, it's not always just me. That's also been a nice change and evolution as we've grown.

**Joe:** *To say that competition is... Everybody has online training anymore. I mean you can hardly go to a Website that doesn't offer this or doesn't offer some type of training, whether it's download of eBooks, PowerPoints, videos or whatever. What do you think separates Gemba Academy from the others? I mean you mentioned one thing there which I think is a great way to look at it because people want to see themselves and how other people react but besides that, what is something that separates Gemba Academy?*

**Ron:** Yes. We've been like this from day 1. We never disparage our competitors or say anything bad. There are a lot of great companies out there making awesome content, and so we definitely don't ever go attack the other folk's product or anything like that. I will never disparage anybody, but what I would say I guess, and I don't know if this differentiates us, but who we are, we are practitioners who learned how to make videos. We're not academics, we're not professors or anything like that. We've all done it and continue to do it as far as practicing Lean and Continuous Improvement, Six Sigma, or whatever discipline of continuous improvement. I think that's the first thing is that we're real practitioners who learned how to make videos.

Secondly, from a business model perspective, we've got a rather unique... There're a few people that have copied us now, but we do site-based licenses, and that was very, very disruptive when we first got into the business. Namely, if you have 500 people at your company, you only need one subscription to Gemba Academy and then all those people, all

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those 500 folks can access our content. Especially early on, most of the online training companies and maybe even today still, especially in the Six Sigma space, sell per person. We've never liked that approach. We think that drives kind of an elitist mentality, like 'oh you're so important that you got to go through this program', but everybody else in the company doesn't get that information. We never liked that model, so site-based licenses have been a big deal for us.

I think again there's a lot of good companies out there, but one area that no one can beat us in this space is our customer support. We have the best customer support team there is.

No questions, not even close. When we get a customer, the reason that we have such a high renewal rate is because if they ever have problems, ever have questions, ever need help with a question about a video or they are having some technical problem, we love problems because it allows us to engage the customer and solve the problem for them and then build friendships and relationships with these folks and that's been I think a big key to our success. So even if it was just me, Kevin and John running things before we had other employees, we always worked hard to take care of our customers; whether we had 10 or 1000, it didn't matter. We've never changed that aspect of our business. Those I guess are the three things probably that helped us be successful and helps us today.

**Joe:** *You talk about site licensing, and I'm always a big advocate of flip learning and online training, and really the site licenses are very compatible to that. Someone can watch and then they can go practice and go over the practice with a consultant or a partner or*

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*something. Is that something you do with Gemba? Is that constructed somehow?*

**Ron:** Oh yes, definitely. I mean all of our videos are short. We did a lot of research in the beginning on just adults and how we learn and our attention span as you know is worse than children. The longest video you'll find that's like a teaching lesson is going to be say 10 to 12 minutes. Most of them are like 8 to 9 minutes, which is really the sweet spot for what adults will commit to. But what we try to make all of our videos is extremely actionable. At the end of our courses, we have something called an action guide which is like, okay you just learned about this topic, whatever it might be. Now, here are some things that you can immediately to go practice. What we don't want to be known as and we kind of cringe when people say, oh you're eLearning. No, not really. We're not really eLearning because eLearning kind of sounds like that safety training everybody has to go through and if you don't, you're going to get in trouble or something. We would rather see people use our content again and again and again. Some of our best customers... I remember one gentleman told me; he said, I've watched your 5S Course like 200 times this past year; did you have a cold during video number 4? Because he has heard it so many times and that's what we love, because they're running different people through and so they use it again and again. That's how we designed the content.

Now as far... Well, we really do promote the flip learning. The Khan Academy approach, you know the Khan academy with teaching kids Math, now what teachers are doing is they'll have the student go home, watch videos to learn how to multiply or do Calculus or whatever it is and then when they come back to class, they practice. They do homework. Who better

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to help the student through the questions than the teacher, right? So they do their learning at home, and then they come back to the school and get their questions answered. Otherwise, you and I are going to be like, oh my gosh, I don't remember calculus. Let me see. That's been a very popular aspect. A lot of times, you'll get consultants or even internal Lean or Six Sigma kind of trainers if you will, initially a little bit nervous about Gemba Academy. They're like, oh wait a minute, are they going to take my job? That's what I do. I teach people. What am I going to do now?

What we've seen, the evolution is that now, instead of a consultant going in and charging 2000 to \$3000 a day to teach someone about 5S, they'll say watch these Gemba Academy videos and then bring me in, and we're actually going to go out and facilitate change. What do you think someone would rather do? Pay a consultant to actually lead an event and get something done or just come in and teach people. It's a no-brainer, right? That's been a really powerful aspect where many, many consulting companies around the world now leverage Gemba Academy. Let us take care of some of the basic knowledge. Watch it at home if you will and then when you come back to work, we're going to be there, and we're going to get after it, and we're going to invoke change.

**Joe:** *We've talked about Lean and Six Sigma, is there another area of discipline that you cover?*

**Ron:** Those are the two main ones. There's some project management stuff sprinkled with. We spent a lot of time, in 2015 in particular, we did a lot of behavioral style courses. Our

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Culture of Kaizen was one of my favorite courses where we got into like what makes people tick. A lot of stuff like Simon Sinek type stuff, 'The Power of Why', Dan Pink's 'the Drive', what motivates people. A lot of these kinds of the human behavior, like what's going on in our brain, like what's oxytocin, serotonin, dopamine and all these things that make us tick, we really explored that. Because obviously, the tools are pretty easy, and my 13-year-old daughter truly can come in and teach someone how to do 5S, she really gets it, but what she doesn't get is when someone's resisting this stuff called continuous improvement, what do you do and how do you overcome that? We spent a lot of time covering that in 2015. I don't know where that falls into – Lean? Six Sigma? It's humans. We spent a lot of time covering that.

**Joe:** *I think that's so important because everybody learns the tools but really how you enact the tools is the secret. I mean that's the hard part, right?*

**Ron:** Exactly, exactly.

**Joe:** *I have to ask you, what's your opinion on certifications? Do you offer any, because that could influence your answer a little bit?*

**Ron:** Yes. We do offer but at Six Sigma, there's obviously some Lean, kind of a Lean and Six Sigma certification, but it's not a Lean certification. That's the most important thing. We get a lot of questions on that. Something kind of a philosophical thing that we've decided early on is that at least right now, we're not comfortable ever certifying someone as a Lean,

whatever you want to call it, guru, master or something like that. Six Sigma we feel there's a tighter body of knowledge of what's kind of agreed on what Six Sigma is, so we do offer green belt, black belt certifications. It's a very powerful program. We do a lot of certification over the course of... I don't know how many we did in 2015, but it was a lot. But that's a very traditional certification. You watch obviously videos to learn the content. We coach the person through a project. We are not a certification mill. We're not 'get rich quick.' There are some companies out there that do that; that's not us. If you want to get rich quick, don't come to us because you are going to have to do a project and we're going to walk you through that, and then there's an exam, obviously.

But where certifications go wrong and maybe this is where you're getting at is when it drives that mentality of, oh I just want to build something on my resume, or you're doing it for selfish reasons, and you don't have your company's best interest in mind, that's when I think certifications can kind of go wrong. You also see what I call the one and done syndrome. Someone would go through and get their green belt or the black belt or whatever it might be, and they do a project, and that's great, but then, that's it. They get their plaque or whatever it is they get, and they never use the tools again. It's not only bad; it's sad when people do that and really waste their company's money. So we really work hard to let people know what our certifications are about. It's about truly learning the tools, practicing the tools most importantly and then, bringing value to your organization. But believe it or not, we've got some folks, stay at home moms and what not who are going to go back into the workforce and they feel like this will help them as far as their qualifications and so we have really fun and unique ways to work with those folks because they might not be able to do a traditional

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project. So we find some really fun ways for them to practice the tools and those are some of my favorite folks to mentor really because they truly want to do it, and they're really excited. So that's kind of our approach to certification.

**Joe:** *I see H.R. driving that a little bit. I've seen where they're asking for Lean certifications now, and if that is a requirement of H. R. to get maybe a higher level Lean job in an organization, it certainly should be a good source for it.*

**Ron:** Yes. Well, the way that we handle our certification, we're okay with it saying Lean and Six Sigma Certification which is a little bit different than just Lean Certification. Yes, I don't know if there are folks out there selling Lean Certification. I'm sure there are. Lean is such a way of life, and I've met Masaaki Imai many times, and he'll be the first one to tell you that he's still learning. If Masaaki Imai is still learning, then I think Ron and Joe still have quite a bit to learn, so I'm not sure we should call ourselves 'Lean Masters.'

**Joe:** *I think that it goes against that philosophy of Lean to have a Lean certification. I think you allude to that as the whole problem with it. You know when we think of online training, where is it going? I mean you got a crystal ball, and you're working in the field every day, where do you think it's going? What's going to be in the future, besides technology maybe?*

**Ron:** Technology is a big part of it, and we're working on some pretty, wickedly, awesome stuff that's going to be coming up even here in 2016. I can't really talk about it right now,

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or Kevin will probably punch me in the throat when he listens to it, but we've got some really cool stuff coming from a technology perspective that no one, trust me, has seen, and no one is doing in the Lean and Continuous Improvement world. We're going to definitely break some ground there. But I would say, we just launched a new Website, our newest Website this past weekend in fact and we're going to rebuild again.

Right now, we never had a good way, it's embarrassing to say but we've never had a good way to search all of our content, and we've got almost 1000 videos, and I don't even know how many thousand blog articles and all these different resources and it was just really hard to find stuff on our Website. Now with the new Website, we have 'search.' Being able to utilize our content is a big part of our focus here in 2016. We also plan to build some more community and not necessarily like old school forum and stuff like that, but we've got a lot of plans to figure out how our customers can really interact with each other. We do a lot of round tables and what not with some of our larger enterprise customers where they meet each other, and they talk with each other, and those are incredible, just learning from one another, but we want to be able to do that for all of our customers and not just the large enterprise customers. We're already seeing some folks are streaming conferences and stuff like that, and we go to a lot of conferences, and we have great relationship with organizations like AME and the Lean Frontiers and what not, so we're doing more and more collaboration helping them and they help us, so it's a friendly, awesome relationship.

Other than that, I mean I think that people are going to always need information. How the information is delivered, whether one day we're wearing oculus glasses and we're walking

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around doing virtual Gemba walks, that could happen, I don't know. We'll have to wait and see. I don't know if I've answered your question Joe, but I think technology is going to have a lot into it. But no matter what the technology looks like, if you're not taking care of your customers, you're not going to succeed. I don't think that's ever going to change and so that's just a big part of what we do.

**Joe:** *What I pulled from that is that you're really trying to build a more collaborative network, not only within your material resources and being able to make it easier to use and find more specific things, but also with connecting your customer and creating a peer network of some type.*

**Ron:** Exactly. That's exactly it because someone watches our quick changeover course and they're like, yeah but I'm an accountant, how does this apply? They post the question and the next thing you know, they get like 40 people within 5 minutes replying, well how long does it take you to close your books, Mr. and Mrs. Accountant? There's a thing called external and internal tasks to the way you close your books; that's how it applies. So getting people to talk to each other and help each other. Eventually, we want to have the ability for folks to really share their successes, share their challenges with each other and support each other. Build that tribe, as Seth Godin calls it.

**Joe:** *I think you nailed it because people want to have a resource that they can trust because just Googling things, there's a certain amount of distrust anymore of what you find out, even reading reviews and different things like that. They want to go to a source that they feel that*

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*is somewhat trustworthy and I think Gemba Academy provides that actually.*

**Ron:** Yes. Well, thank you. I mean we work hard at it. We're not perfect. We talk internally, do we practice what we preach? How's our Hoshin coming along? So we're constantly improving ourselves, and the company has grown pretty fast, and that's great, but there have been some growing pains along the way. Last year, we transitioned to a very, very large customer relationship management software and that was a big change for us, but it was the right change, and maybe it slowed us down a little bit temporarily, but it was the right thing to do from a long-term perspective. And so we go through those growing pains like any company does.

**Joe:** *And everybody does is the exact way to put it. What's the best way for someone to contact you and learn more about Gemba Academy?*

**Ron:** The easiest way is just to go to [Gembaacademy.com](http://Gembaacademy.com). G-e-m-b-a-a-c-a-d-e-m-y dot com. Obviously, there's a contact form on there. People can email me directly. It's pretty easy – [ron@gembaacademy.com](mailto:ron@gembaacademy.com). I'm so happy for folks to connect with me that way. I am on LinkedIn. I don't know if you want to put that in your show notes or something like that, and Gemba Academy obviously has a really nice following on our LinkedIn page. We're on Twitter, and you know more about all that than I do Joe. Kevin and the team handle most of all that. But yes, we're everywhere. [Gembaacademy.com](http://Gembaacademy.com) is the best way. We offer a free trial, so people can kick the tires and we want people to try it out before they buy, so there's no pressure on that end of it.

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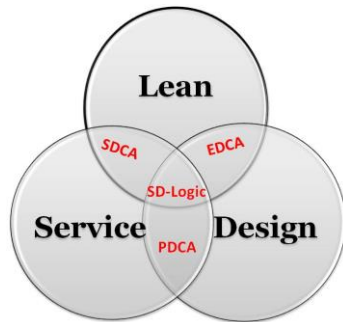
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**Joe:** *I want to ask you, you offer that free trial, I was going to ask you if there's a way I can try you out? Is there some advice you could give someone on how do they know what's behind someone's curtain or firewall in a digital sense? I always kind of wonder that when I'm pressing and looking at something.*

**Ron:** Yes. Well if you approach an online-based company who won't give you full access to the product before you buy, you really need to ask why is that. Our best sales tool is to say here it is, try it out and let us know. We're very flexible. Will some people rip off our content and not buy it from us? Maybe. But we've quit worrying about that a long time ago because we just realized, bad people are going to be bad people no matter what you do. We follow that principle that most people are inherently good, so we don't worry about that. But yes, I would say if you can't try it, don't buy it. I think that's my best advice.

**Joe:** *I think that's great advice, Ron. I'd like to thank you very much. This podcast would be available on the Business901 iTunes store and the Business901 Website. Thanks again, Ron.*

**Ron:** All right, thank you, Joe.



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Joe Dager is President of Business901, a firm specializing in bringing the continuous improvement process to the sales and marketing arena. He takes his process thinking of over thirty years in marketing within a wide variety of industries and applies it through Lean Marketing and Lean Service Design.

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