

Episode 002: Why is Lean so Hard?

Welcome to Lean Leadership for Ops Managers, the podcast for leaders in Ops Management who want to spark improvement, foster engagement, and boost problem solving - AND still get their day job done. Here's your host, Leadership Trainer, Lean Enthusiast, and Spy Thriller Junkie, Jamie V. Parker.

Why is Lean so hard? Have you ever found yourself asking that question? I understand that a lot of the concepts are simple, right? We can understand them, they make sense. But simple does not necessarily mean easy, especially when it comes to implementation and sustaining and broadening. So I want to take a little bit of a flashback. Let's go back to 2012, 2013, somewhere in that timeframe, and I was in a Regional Operations Management role at the time. It had been about two years since we, in our division at first started our Lean journey. So we were practicing some kind of, let's call them early levels of Lean. Just tons of problems, tons of things we messed up, tons of things we did wrong time. We'll take another podcast to talk about all that. But here we are, we're about two years in and so we have kind of that introductory level of 5S and Visual Management. We've got stand up meetings that we had started, and we're working on improving the flow of work to try and get closer toward continuous flow. And we were getting results. We could see that impact particularly in our quality especially, and even in some of the costs and productivity measures. So we were getting results but it was really, really hard. It felt so much harder than it should be, and it felt like we were dragging people along. This really bothered me because I could see how much potential there was for us to engage people across the division, across the organization in improvement, and yet we were struggling with it.

So I really dug in, and I went and had listening sessions, touched with lots of team members really listening to what they had to say. Went out and did observations, what's really going on? I just really went into the details. I needed to figure this out. Why is this harder than it should be? Here's what I learned, is that what we were saying wasn't matching what we were doing. You see, we were making lots of changes to work and workflow and the things that team members did, and maybe even to some of our own activities as leaders, but we weren't really changing our leadership. What I mean by that are the interactions, how we showed up, what our priorities were. So while we were expecting all of this change to happen in the work and on the floor, we weren't actually doing the internal work as leaders, and we weren't changing how we were interacting

This is what put me on the path I am now. I became super passionate and purposeful about this work with leaders. So at FedEx working directly with Operations Managers and trying to figure out what kind of changes and adjustments do we need to make? And I was hearing the same kind of things that I heard from managers in FedEx when I started working with clients and when I was out in the Lean community. I love the Lean community because everyone's givers, we're sharers. So, throughout all of this work of working on this leadership side, I kept hearing some of the same things over and over. Here's what I kept hearing. So here's what normally happens. We have a problem, a challenge, something that we're either trying to overcome or work toward and we look at this and we say, "Okay, how can we solve this problem?" Then we go and implement systems or tools. There's some sort of tactical thing that we do,

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whether that's in workflow, whether that is in 5S, whether that's your Visual Management or your Kanban systems. There's some sort of thing, tool, tactical step that we take.

Then this is what I hear. "At some point, that becomes like wallpaper." Have you ever had wallpaper in your plant or your organization? I know I have. Maybe it's a Visual Management system and then at some point, we're not updating it, it's not current. Or maybe it is, but we're just going through the motions. We're just going through the motions of our startup meeting and we're not actually using the information and the tool and the system to help us make decisions, to help us solve problems, to help us create more value. It becomes wallpaper, whether that's physical visual wallpaper, or just wallpaper by going through routines.

So, I want to use an example and I'm going to talk about systems and then how we can do this differently, the pieces that are missing, what are the two other pieces that are missing? I'm going to use an example of the Peloton. Do you know the Peloton, the spin bike? I'm using this because so many people that are in my friend network have it. My brother even got one. So everybody's getting this spin bike, and they're talking about it and they're so stoked and they talk about all their rides and who their favorite trainers are and the different playlists, right? I'm hearing all about it. If you're not really a Peloton fan, that's okay. You can use any sort of fitness tool or system that you're familiar with. So maybe it's the Couch to 5K running app, or maybe it's the Beachbody P90X or whatever at-home workout. Or maybe it's the Zumba class at the gym or your personal trainer. So maybe it's a personal trainer that you work with and having the process of going three times a week to work with that trainer. Regardless, you can use any example you want. In all of those, what you recognize is that is the system. That's the tool, that's the system that is going to help you improve your fitness.

Now, here's the thing, the system by itself is not enough. This is how we get wallpaper if we don't have behaviors. My friend Teresa said one time, it was a few months ago - she's back on it now - but a few months ago, she said, "You know what, I've been so bad. My Peloton is basically a really expensive coat rack right now." So she had this system, she had the tool sitting in her house, and yet because she wasn't using it. because she didn't have the behavior of daily use, it was in fact an expensive coat rack, wallpaper. So you have to have behaviors. You can't just have a system. You have to have the behaviors. But here's the other thing, is that belief drives behavior. Are you familiar with the Find Your Why movement and ideas? It's been shared with by Simon Sinek but lots of other people, this is not the first time you've heard this, right? So this whole idea that when you find your "why", your reason, and it is so strong, that belief actually drives your behavior.

Here's what happens in our Peloton example. You have a "why" that is so strong, something like, "I want to have the energy to run around outside and play with my grandchildren. I want to make sure that I am alive and healthy and able to walk my daughter down the aisle." Whatever that "why" might be for you. It's something that when your alarm goes off in the morning, you go "Ugh, I don't feel like it. I wish I could stay in bed. And yet I get up anyways and I do that behavior anyways because my belief, my value, my "why" is so great that I do it."

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Here's the thing, though. You ever had a "why" that you feel is pretty strong, and yet when that alarm clock goes off in the morning, you still hit the snooze button, snooze, snooze? And you're just like, "Yes, I want this, and I have the Peloton bike sitting right there, yet I cannot figure out how to actually get out of bed and use it in the morning." You might hear a fitness expert say something like this, they might give you advice that says, "Here's what I want you to do. I want you to take your clothes, your workout clothes, your gear, and I want you to lay it out at the end of your bed or on your dresser the night before. Then when you get up, all I want you to worry about is putting those clothes on."

So that is a behavior and the reason they suggest that is because a lot of times for a lot of people, just doing that behavior, setting out your clothes the night before, and just putting them on actually then impacts your belief. Now you're like, "Oh, you know what, I guess I could do it. I don't have to do the whole ride, but I could do five minutes." Then you go down there and you get on for five minutes and you end up doing the whole thing. Have you ever heard the phrase, "It's easier to act your way into a new way of thinking"? I first heard that phrase, I actually read it in an article about NewMe years and years ago. Sometimes it is. The thing is, belief drives behavior, but it goes both ways because behavior influences belief. In fact, all three of these - belief, behavior, systems - influence and reinforce each other.

You see, the Peloton system isn't just the bike. It's not just a spin bike. If it was, they wouldn't be able to sell the thing for 2500 bucks plus a subscription fee, right? It's the engaging instructors and the data that tracks your improvement and notifies the instructor to give you a shout out when you hit a milestone like, "Hey, it's your 100th ride. I just want to shout out to 'so and so username'." It's the community of all of these folks who are Peloton riders as well. It's all of this that works together. So the system actually influences and reinforces your beliefs. When you see the data, and you can see your improvement and your instructor calls you out and your instructor has this great playlist and you're like, "I can do this, I'm doing it", it also impacts your behavior because that playlist that's so awesome and now you're singing to it your favorite songs, and it gets you pumping and then you stick with it. You're like, "I'm only going to do five minutes", but you end up doing the whole 45-minute ride. You see, beliefs, behaviors, systems, they all work in tandem. That means all three - beliefs, behavior systems - need to be aligned.

So let's go back to my Region Ops job. I learned that we were saying things like, "Blame the process, not the person" and yet when a big customer failure happened, the first thing we did is we went and asked who ran the job. I found out that we were saying things like, "Hey, team members, you know the work, you do this every day, we want your ideas, and we want your improvements and we want you to contribute." We even had a system of an idea board and yet, that system would sit there unused and we wouldn't get back to team members. Even when we did, we often explained to them why that idea wouldn't work. "We tried that before. Oh, no but see, you don't understand this." We were out of alignment and this was making it harder. It was like this misalignment was a big ball and chain making the journey more difficult. So we were getting results but we were doing it a little bit harder than we needed to.

And it wasn't just misalignment and what we said and did, it was also misalignment in our own beliefs as leaders. You see, as I listen and as we dug in, we found out things like this - regardless of what leaders

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would say, what they thought was “Well, you know, it’s faster if I just do it” or “Yeah, I want to engage and empower, but they just don’t understand flow the way I do” or “What do you mean all this respect for people. empowerment, engagement stuff or recognition? They want a cookie for just doing their jobs?” Or “We have to get work out the door. We don’t have time to also teach and train and facilitate improvement activities. We want to do it, but the only way for me to do that is if I reduce my production targets.” By the way, that last one, if you struggle with it, make sure you check out episode one because I dig into that particular challenge in Ops Management. We talk about thoughts and language and how that all intersects.

So here we were, and we found out that it wasn’t just that what we were doing didn’t match what we were saying and what we were putting systems and tools out there for. It was also some of our own beliefs deep down. We said respect for people and yet deep down, we still had some of these old hangups. So we had to develop our leaders, our senior leaders and our plant managers, and our department managers, and line leaders. We said, “Okay, we need to help you think differently, to behave differently, and to work in different systems altogether, all in alignment, all reinforcing each other.

So here’s the thing, in the next episode, I’m going to go into more detail on this with examples of how it shows up and how you can apply the model in your work. For now, though, I want you to take one action. Here’s what I want you to do. I want you to think about beliefs, behaviors and systems and I want you to go out and look for inconsistencies. Be on the lookout, take notice, jot them down. In fact, if you go to the show notes for this episode, you’ll be able to download a visual aid so you can keep this front and center. If you’re not sure where to start, look for where you have a mismatch, that what you say, or what we say or what we say we want to be doesn’t match what we actually are. Look for systems that are becoming wallpaper, systems that maybe aren’t being sustained. Look for the things that you have to follow up on constantly or else they don’t get done, start there. Beliefs, behaviors, systems, these three in alignment working together, that’s the key. Your next action step is awareness so let’s go find those inconsistencies.

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