

## Episode 011: Biggest Lean Pitfalls for Managers

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.

Welcome, Ops Managers. In episode 10, I shared the top mistake I see Ops Leaders making when they decide to practice Lean to improve their business and lead their teams. And if you remember, it was to delegate responsibility for improvement. If you missed it, go back to episode 10 and check it out. Now, I guess you could say that I was lucky to avoid this mistake when I started my lean practice, though it wasn't because of anything I did. It was really just out of necessity. We didn't have any improvement resources to delegate responsibility to. There weren't any internal engineers or CI practitioners that had bandwidth to support us. And there definitely wasn't any budget allocated to spend on outside support or consultants either. So the only way we could pursue Lean is if we fully owned it in operations and manufacturing.

Now, that doesn't mean we were immune to the mistake. There were still plant managers who didn't take ownership and initiative and waited for me to take the lead. They kind of stood by, "Well, what's Jamie going to talk to us about next or encourage us to take on next?" There were still plant managers who tried to delegate CI to an Assistant Manager or team lead in their plant. So it happened, but since I was taking ultimate responsibility, it was easier for me to identify and adjust this when needed. So let's call it luck that I was able to avoid most of the impact of that one big mistake. The story is quite different for today's episode, though. Today, we're going to talk about three additional pitfalls I see managers fall into. And when I say I see it happen, I do see it happen, but you should know that I have fallen into every single one of them. So at the end of the discussion, I will also share with you a resource to help you take your one next step.

The first pitfall is a top-down push. It comes from leadership. It comes from you and the CI team potentially. And you are going to have the operations frontline team implement some tool or tactic or system, and usually, it's mapped out. So it's not only the direction, it's mapped out as to what it looks like and how they'll do it. Let me tell you this story about my very first Lean exposure. I actually shared a little bit of this story in chapter six of the book *Practicing Lean*, when Mark Graban invited me to contribute to the book.

So it was the beginning of our division's Lean practice, and like many organizations, we started with 5S. And we had 20 plants across the country, so a few managers got together and built out the "5S Program". They determined what was needed at each station and each zone. They designed and printed labels and signage and ordered any supplies that were needed. They made a PowerPoint deck with pictures showing what each zone needed to look like. And then we shipped all 20 plants a "5S kit" to go and execute.

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You see, we ran 24 seven operations, so our computer stations and areas were shared across three shifts. And because of all the sharing, we had labels for things on this computer desk for things like pens, and the stapler, and the scissors and get this, the monitor and the keyboard. If you've ever watched Mark Graban's parody of 5S in the office video, then your mind just immediately heard the character in the video saying, "Has anyone ever had a monitor go missing?" Yeah, this is a problem, right? Think about this. Here we were, we had just started digging into Lean thinking and working. We were telling our team, "Oh, this Lean stuff is awesome. It's going to make your job so much better. You're going to love it!" And then we sent these kits calling it 5S, but not actually practicing the methodology of 5S, and going crazy overboard, totally missing the point of the tool. And, of course, in good old-fashioned Command and Control Management style, we then sent our region managers out to the plants to evaluate and to check for compliance.

Look, people thought we were crazy. Our team members were like, "You're crazy. This doesn't help me. Are you kidding me? Are you trying to micromanage me?" It actually put us behind the curve because whatever we decided to do next, we had already lost credibility. Now, I'm going to give a little grace and space to everyone involved in that and say, we just didn't really know any better. And we went through that and we had to learn from that. And so, I hope you can learn from our mistake too.

Now, I know this 5S example, it might seem like an extreme. And there may be some prioritization and direction setting that occurs at the executive level with executive and senior leadership teams. The key here is that we can't dictate all of the how and the what to achieve that priority or direction. So while we might set direction and we might set some of the priorities for the organization, we can't dictate the how, we can't make the "5S Program" because if we do, we're ignoring respect for people, and we're failing to develop anybody. We're really just using Command and Control Management but calling it something different. The reality is, it happens way more than you may realize or expect. So check yourself so that you don't fall into the "top-down push" pitfall.

Okay, the second pitfall is making it all about *their* work - the production work on the floor, the work operators do, the manufacturing work, the operation stuff on the floor, right? It's *their* work. And of course, it makes sense. We're trying to create more value. And when we think about customer value, customer value is typically created in our operations or production or manufacturing workflows. So of course, that's where we turn. And so, we jump in and we start doing 5S that operators have to follow. And workflow layout changes that change how operators work. And we throw out hour by hour or other Visual Management tools that operators are expected to fill out. We go out and we do waste walks that identify process waste that we want operators to remove from how they do their work.

Here's the problem - we spend very little time applying Lean thinking and working to our work as operations team leads, as supervisors, as managers, as directors, as VPs. How do we work every day? What is our workflow? What process waste exists in our work? Where is information not flowing continuously? There could be some product, could be some physical stuff flowing; in a lot of cases information. So where's information not flowing continuously? Where is a lack of quality information or

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action, on our part, hurting things downstream? And so, we end up falling into this role of teacher and director, but never really the role of doer and learner.

And here's the problem - we might go and do some top-down changes in someone else's work like we talked about in the first pitfall, but doing that in someone else's work does not have the same learning experience as doing it in our own work. So we aren't learning all of the lessons that we need to learn through action and iteration. And because we're not learning all of those lessons, it actually slows progress. We also don't get to undergo the experience of improvement - the feelings, the fear, the anger, the emotions. And when we fall into the "making it about *their* work" pitfall, we're also sending some pretty big mixed messages to our team because what we're saying they should do is not something that we're fully embracing and practicing in our work. It's the whole, "Do as I say, not as I do" problem.

I have definitely fallen into this pitfall. In fact, the first several years of my trying to practice Lean was all about the production workflow. I mean, sure, I made some little changes here and there to my work, but most of it was all focused on *them* and *their* work. So check yourself so that you don't fall into the "make it all about *their* work" pitfall. And if you have fallen into it, work on course correcting it.

The third common pitfall Ops Managers fall into with Lean is ignoring the people leadership side of Lean, and not just Lean but leadership in general, right? In our rush and focus and effort to change the way we work, to improve our processes, we forget to change the way we lead to improve the way we interact with people.

Several years after that fateful 5S start to Lean, we had learned a lot of lessons and made a lot of improvements and things were better, but I knew they weren't as good as they should be. And to be honest, sometimes it still felt like we were dragging people along. And so, when I tried to understand why is this struggle happening and got in deeper with it, I learned that we had fallen into this pitfall. We made tons of progress in our work processes, but we failed to also make progress in our people leadership.

So we said things like, "Blame the process, not the person", but when a customer failure happened, we asked, "Who ran the job?" We said, "We want your improvement ideas", but often when we got them, we explained why they wouldn't work - "We tried that before." We held daily startup meetings but our interactions with people in those meetings were still pretty heavy on the directing and telling side. And a lot of times, our reaction to red was still like, "Ugh, hit your number!" We executed on Gemba walks but we didn't improve our skills at high impact listening and asking good coaching questions. So the walks were more about what we needed, what we wanted to learn what we wanted to see than what our teams needed. It was too much directing.

So I realized that we - leadership - were actually the biggest obstacle to fully integrating Lean thinking and working into our culture. We still had remnants of old school management because we hadn't figured out how to change the way we made decisions, the way we prioritize, and the way we interacted with team members in a way that aligned with Lean thinking and with all of the things we were asking *them* to

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do. And that's how my passion for Lean Leadership Development began. Not just Lean leadership from a tools and systems standpoint, but also our thoughts and beliefs, and our behaviors and our skills. You can hear more about how beliefs, behaviors and systems work together to form the Transformation Trinity in episode two and episode three.

So just a few hours ago, I was on a small group call with a few members of the Women in Lean - Our Table group. It's an amazing group of women supporting each other, and really co-creating this experience together, and has been one of the best things to enter my professional life. So if you are a woman interested in joining us, you can find us through the LinkedIn group. It's called Women in Lean - Our Table.

Okay, back to a few hours ago, the four of us were talking, and woman after woman explained that the missing piece for them was the how to do it, primarily the how to do it on the soft side of things. That they had read book after book after book and they could learn about the technical how-tos of any part of the Lean tools and systems, but they weren't learning what to do and what to say and how to say it when they met resistance in a Kaizen event or in a problem solving project. Or what were the steps that they needed to take to establish trust in a relationship? Or how to listen with empathy within things like Gemba walks and daily startup meetings and Kaizen events. Or how to address the emotions in the people stuff, all the people stuff - the soft stuff, the leadership stuff? Because here's the thing - business is personal and leadership is a relationship. So when we think about how are we integrating Lean thinking and working into how we lead, we have to understand that that includes us and our leadership side too, the people side too. So check yourself so that you don't fall into the "failing to improve people leadership" pitfall. And if you have fallen into it, make a commitment to layer in people leadership improvement in alignment with your work and your process improvement.

Okay, let's recap. There are four mistakes or pitfalls that I see Ops Leaders regularly fall into when they try to engage Lean thinking and working in their operations. The first big mistake we talked about in episode 10 - delegating responsibility of improvement to someone else. The three pitfalls we discussed today are:

1. Top-down push
2. Making it all about *their* work.
3. Failing to improve your people leadership along with business improvement.

So if you've fallen into one of these pitfalls, whether you're just barely hanging over the edge, or you're at the bottom of the well, it's okay. This is a common occurrence, so give yourself a little grace and space, and then make a commitment to get out. Now, listen, you may be so far deep into that hole that you can't get out in one or two steps, and that's cool. That's okay. But acknowledge it and figure out the one next step you can take toward correcting it.

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Now, I will be back next week for a super fun conversation with a special guest and you will not want to miss it. Until next time.

If you're an executive who is leading a team of Operations Managers, and you see that your improvement culture and journey is stalled or slowed because you haven't quite integrated Lean thinking into the everyday management and leadership, then let's talk. We can hop on the phone for a quick 20-minute discussion. No sales pitch, just an initial conversation. Schedule a call by going to [processplusresults.com](https://processplusresults.com) and then clicking the "Schedule a call" button.