

Episode 009: What Lean Folks Get Wrong About Ops 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.

So, I might have a bone to pick, particularly when it comes to how Ops Managers are talked about in many Lean communities. Well, actually, I don't think the people I disagree with have malicious intent. I think they're simply sharing their experiences through their own lenses. I just happen to have different experiences. So maybe not a bone to pick, maybe just a discussion to have. In this episode, I want to share what I believe is one of the biggest misconceptions that Lean practitioners hold about Ops, Managers, leaders, and executives. We'll talk about why I think this common thought is inaccurate, what's actually happening instead, and what it means for all of us and our next steps, both in the CI world and in the Ops leadership world.

I've been traveling in CI and Lean influencer circles since my very first presentation at the Association for Manufacturing Excellence International Conference in 2015, and I keep hearing a similar sentiment about Ops leaders. It goes something like this, "*They* are all about profits over people. *They* believe in results at any cost. *They* don't care about respect for people, just 'What are people doing for me?' *They* have no interest in continuous improvement. All they care about is hitting their daily target, and they think CI is the CI person's job, not theirs." You see, what I often hear about Ops Managers is that they don't care about people or improvement. They just care about hitting their numbers. So many CI folks I've talked with see managers, the Ops Managers, leading departments that they partner with, as the obstacle. So let's explore my experience with Ops leaders and talk about what that means for how operations and improvement can partner together to create more value.

Here's what I usually experience when I work with Ops leaders, starting with the respect for people pillar. They tend to say things like this, "You know, I care about every single individual on my team. There is nothing I want more than for each of them to succeed individually and for us to succeed collectively. I know I push my team, and sometimes it might even come across a little harsh, but I believe it's for the greater collective good and for their individual success as well. I'm not being hard - I'm just doing what I think I have to do. You see, I love my team and I want to give them the space to work autonomously and make their own decisions, but at the end of the day, we have a job to do. And there are times when it feels like I can only go so far and then I have to hold people accountable or bring down the hammer because autonomous work and decision making has led to a negative impact on our results. So there are just times when I'm afraid of being too soft, that if I'm too soft results will suffer."

All right, this is Jamie talking again. You should see, I think this idea that Ops Executives, Managers and leaders don't care about people is a misconception. Most Ops leaders I meet care deeply; they are under pressure to deliver results. And sometimes they haven't developed the skills to deliver and drive results through people-centric leadership. They need help, not judgment. So let's stop saying that they don't care

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about people. Instead, let's start asking questions to better understand the challenges they face and how we can support them.

Here's another thing I experience with top leaders, continuing with the continuous improvement pillar. I hear them say things like this, "I have to hit my numbers because my job and career depend on it" or "because shareholders require it", or "the long term sustainability of this company and its positive impact on our local economy depend on it. So I want to do all of the CI things. I even believe that they can help. I believe it's the right way, but it seems like Lean is this add-on on top of my day job. And in order to get it done, I'd have to do it full time but I can't. It feels like any time I spend on improvement work takes away time I spend helping my team make product or deliver services for customers. So sometimes it seems like respect for people or continuous improvement are in competition with delivering results. And when my back is against the wall, I end up [having] to pick delivering for the customer today. I certainly don't want to let any customers down."

All right, Jamie back, here you go. You see, it's not that most Ops leaders, particularly those who have been effectively introduced to Lean, don't want or care about continuous improvement. It's that right now, it seems like it's too hard to get real change to happen, and to stick. And the payoff is too far out in the future to make it a priority today. It's presented as an additional burden, something they have to do on top of their day jobs. And they haven't figured out how to use it to remove burden and to make work easier. So let's stop saying that they don't care about improvement. Instead, let's gain a better understanding of how the current way we engage Ops leaders and Lean feels more like a burden than like a better way of working and leading, and figure out how can we help them instead of dropping things on them. So this is why I think this idea in Lean circles that Ops Managers, "They don't care; they just want to hit their numbers" is one of the biggest misconceptions I hear. I challenge you to reconsider your assumptions, and then let's figure out what we do about it. I have two recommendations for you today.

Recommendation number one - let's shift the focus from Lean to value. So often we ask, "How do we better engage Ops leaders in lean and improvement?" Well, we start by shifting the focus. Lean and CI are not the end. They're not the purpose. So we shouldn't ask, "How do we better engage Ops leaders in Lean and improvement?" Instead, we ask, "How can we better engage Ops leaders in creating more value? How can we help them remove burden and overcome obstacles so that their teams can create more value?" Respect for people and how they lead every day may be a way they can improve. Leading their teams through CI techniques may be a way they can improve, but Lean isn't the goal.

Here's my second recommendation - let's move from push to pull, meeting them where they are. The reality is that if you're in a continuous improvement role, then your goals probably don't match up one for one with the goals of the Ops leaders you support. The way you're assessed and measured in your role and the way that the Ops leader is assessed and measured in his or her role is probably different. Often I see improvement practitioners head into a department with already defined projects and priorities to work on. Sometimes they even go in with a plan implementing a tool or tactic like 5S or Visual Management. I recommend that we put those to the side and instead, learn from the Ops leaders we support. Where are

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they now? What are their biggest pain points? What challenges could we help them overcome that would actually free up time and bandwidth or enable them to lead their teams better?

The thing is, if we want Ops leaders to care about improvement, and CI, we should probably start by helping them with the things they already care about. We may think that we should help them improve quality because we see that's a gap in the metrics and the KPIs. But if we ask the right questions, and really listen, we might find out that their vacation approval and timekeeping adjustment processes are the biggest thorns in their side. Maybe they spend 30 minutes a day just dealing with timekeeping issues. If we can help them improve this, they could gain 10, 15 or 20 minutes of their time back every day. And then that frees up time where they can now feel like they could participate in improving quality. We need to meet them where they are. And sometimes where they are is not ready to work on the KPI thing quite yet. I know that was going to create more value, but there might actually be an obstacle before that. So we want to move from pushing projects and priorities onto them and instead, build trust, demonstrate impact, and then help them with those customer and value-focused areas we need to improve as an organization.

So start by figuring out what their biggest pain points are. Start by figuring out what they care about and why. If an Ops leader that you support feels like they're treading water, they're already working 10-hour plus days every single day, then adding a project onto their plate might hit resistance. But if we can demonstrate the value of improvement by helping them improve the work they're already doing and freeing up some of their time, that will move them closer to working on more improvement activities.

Here's the bottom line of this discussion. Let's not assume that resistance from an Ops leader means they don't care. Or even that poor leadership behaviors at times means they don't care, because they probably do care. They just need help managing competing priorities and building their leadership and improvement skills. So as improvement practitioners, let's help them from a place of serving them. And if you're an Ops leader listening to this right now, here's what I encourage for you. What do you really believe and value? Ask yourself that question and then check in. How do your actions align with that? Where you letting the day's burdens or overwhelm cause you to make choices and prioritize in ways that don't align with how you want to lead and how you want to create value for customers? All right, that's it for today. Looking forward to talking with you next week.

You've been listening to Lean Leadership for Ops Managers with me, your host, Jamie V. Parker. If you're interested in developing your team to effectively recognize contributions through reinforcing feedback, I have virtual and on-site programs that can be customized to your needs, and you'll start to see results in just three weeks. You can email me at jamie@processplusresults.com or click on the "Schedule a call" button at my website, processplusresults.com.