

Episode 013: The Definition of Lean Leadership

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.

Hey Ops Leaders. Today I'm going to share my perspective on what the definition is of Lean leadership. And it's kind of an elusive, hard to define thing. So in the last episode, our guest, Ron Pereira talked about the daily management system serving as the foundation of Lean management, which is why we're now going to shift to talk about Lean leadership. And before we can talk about the foundation of Lean leadership, we first need to define it. What is lean leadership, that elusive hard to define thing? So I'm going to do my best today to define it, and I reserve the right to modify this over time. So let's consider it a snapshot in time, rather than a carved in stone kind of thing. Here's what to expect, in today's episode. We're going to first talk about is Lean leadership even the right term. And the second thing we're going to do is define Lean leadership, breaking it down into Lean and leadership. And then, of course, I'll leave you a next step.

So first up, is Lean leadership, even the right term? Full disclosure, I don't know. I've really actually struggled with this particular question. And I've even posed the question to groups I'm in like, the Women in Lean - Our Table group that I reference. And despite all the conversations I've had, I'm still not sure. We all kind of have these different opinions and it just doesn't quite feel like the right term. At the same time, I don't know what else to call it. So here's where I landed. I'm talking about leadership, and I happen to work with operations leadership teams, who also just so happened to be practicing Lean, or at least trying to. So my hope in using the term Lean leadership is that it will really help people self-select in to this topic of conversation. Now, maybe down the road, I'll figure out a different way to talk about it, but for now, I'm going with the term Lean leadership.

So if I'm using the term Lean leadership, what's the definition of it? And I want to break it down, we're going to talk about Lean, then we're going to talk about leadership. So first, let's talk about Lean. When I think of Lean, the very first thing I think of is creating more value. As much as the term Lean implies less, I actually think of Lean as creating more. And while we mostly talk about creating more value in terms of customers, to me, it's more than that. It's creating more value for customers and for the organization, but also suppliers and vendors, and for our communities, and for our team members and their families. So it's about creating more value across the board. Now, my ultimate work-based purpose is to make the world of work more human. And the reason is because when people feel valued at work, when they're respected and contribute on a greater level, then they go home to be better spouses and parents and neighbors in their communities. So in that respect, Lean is about creating more value so that we create a better world.

Now let's dig a little deeper. We often hear about and talk about the two pillars of Lean - respect for people and continuous improvement - and I'm going to do that here as well. So let's start with the respect for people pillar. We know that respect for people is more than just common courtesy. In fact, I first heard

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the term “respect for humanity” from John Miller, one of the co-founders of Gemba Academy. And this idea that it's more than just casual, respectful interactions, but there's a greater meaning to this pillar, in that we respect the greater human experience, that we acknowledge the gifts that individual humans bring to their table, and that we contribute to the broader human world. What all of that means to me when breaking down the respect for people pillar is that there is a higher purpose. While we might have a job of delivering results, we actually have a greater purpose and responsibility in serving the human experience.

Okay, now let's talk about the pillar of continuous improvement. Now, as I mentioned before, Lean, in my mind, is about creating more value. Yes, for customers, and yes, for everyone else. So the big question is, how do we do that. And to me, it really comes down, this continuous improvement idea comes down to three things:

1. seeing
2. learning
3. taking purposeful action

So we have to learn to see. We have to train our brains to see. We have to put in the beliefs and the behaviors and the systems that help us see. And then we have to learn. We talk about problem solving, heck, I talked about problem solving, but that's really about learning. And not just learning ad hoc, but creating a learning culture, a learning team, a learning organization. And finally, we take purposeful action. It means that learning is not enough on its own. I can go and see and learn all day long. I can make everything I do as a leader about learning. But if I don't take purposeful action based on that learning, then it's not enough.

So quick summary on Lean. Lean is about creating more value for everyone. The respect for people pillar is about having a higher purpose - to serve and improve the broader human world, the human experience. And the continuous improvement pillar is about seeing, learning, and taking purposeful action. So that's the long way about the Lean part of the definition of Lean leadership. Now let's tackle the leadership part of Lean leadership.

First up, I did a bunch of research on the definitions that already exist for leadership. And let me start by saying that the Merriam Webster definition was not helpful at all. I read a lot. I read about leadership needing to be defined by each organization as their own definition. I read Peter Drucker's quote, “The only definition of a leader is someone who has followers.” And John Maxwell's quote, “Leadership is about influence, nothing more, nothing less.” I read an article from Small Business that says, “Leadership is the art of motivating a group of people to act toward achieving a common goal.” And I read articles and entire books about leadership that didn't define it but just talked about the characteristics or values or actions that collectively meant leadership. I wrote a bunch of stuff down in my own reflection of this topic, and here's where I landed, at least for now. Leadership, in my mind, is really to serve and develop people

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through human interactions and relationships, towards the achievement of goals that support purpose. So let's break that down into three parts.

First one, serve and develop people. So to me, leadership is an act of service. It's something that we do in service of another. And one required piece of serving others is development. We develop people. Its core, we develop them in their beliefs, behaviors, and system, ways that create an opportunity for them to make work better, and ways that make their personal lives better. Because when we develop people, the application of that development is not just limited to operations, it's the whole person. So we serve and develop people.

Second part, through human interactions and relationships. Look, I've said it before, and I will say it again now, business is personal, and leadership is a relationship. So I'm specifically calling this out in my definition because I want to make it clear that leadership is an active process that happens in the interactions we have with people. It's not something that's automated by AI. It's not something that we can delegate or defer to our visual management systems or our audit processes. Leadership happens between people. So we serve and develop people through human interactions and relationships.

And then finally, the third part, toward the achievement of goals that support purpose. This essentially says that we don't just lead randomly, right? We lead towards goals. In work, those may be KPI goals, or they may be culture-based goals. Or it might be goals of developing the person so that they're inspired to create change in their personal lives. The point is that there are goals that we are leading towards, and that those goals are purposeful, the greater good, the true north, you may call it. So we put that together and my current personal definition of leadership is this. Leadership is to serve and develop people through human interactions and relationships towards the achievement of goals that support purpose.

Okay, let's put it all together and summarize. What is Lean leadership, right? What is it? So it's serving and developing people through human interactions and relationships, towards the achievement of goals that support purpose. And two ways that we pursue that are respect for people, which puts us on a path toward that higher purpose, that human experience, and continuous improvement, which requires that we see, learn, and take purposeful action.

Let's talk about your next step. Now, listen, I found this process of defining Lean leadership to be a wildly challenging and introspective process. In fact, I was originally going to talk about this topic toward the beginning of the podcast. But when I started digging in, I decided I wanted to allocate more time to really be deliberate in researching and experiencing and understanding and thinking about this topic, and putting it into my words.

So here's your homework. Ready? Your homework, your one next step is to think through this for yourself. So as I shared my current definition of Lean leadership, let me ask you. What is it about my definition that you feel completely aligned with? What is it about my definition that you don't feel aligned with? Where do you disagree? And finally, what would you include in your definition of Lean leadership that you didn't

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hear in my definition? What's missing? I am super interested in hearing what you come up with, so you can share in the comment section on the podcast page. Just go to processplusresults.com/podcast, and then find the episode, there's a place for comments at the bottom. Or just head over to LinkedIn and @ mention me. On LinkedIn, I'm listed as Jamie V. Parker, that's V like Victoria. I'm really looking forward to hearing what you came up with. Where do you agree? Where do you disagree? What's missing? 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 and then clicking the "Schedule a Call" button.