

Episode 010: Top Mistake Ops Leaders Make with Lean

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, welcome to episode 10 of Lean Leadership for Ops Managers. I am super excited to have reached this milestone of 10 episodes published and want to ask for your help. You see, when a podcast is new, it doesn't always show up in the search results when managers search for relevant terms. You can help this podcast get found by more managers by opening the podcast in Apple Podcasts, either on your phone or even on your computer, then, and this is how you can really help, give us a rating and leave a review. As we get more ratings and reviews, we'll show up when people like you are searching for their next podcast obsession.

And while we're talking about reviews, I'd like to thank our listener by the username of Bellae600 for leaving this review: "Jamie totally makes Lean leadership relatable to real life. She brings energy and, dare I say it, fun to learning how to be a better leader. And hey, you don't need to be an Ops Manager to learn something from Jamie. It doesn't matter what you're leading. She can make Lean leadership concepts pertinent to you and what you're working on." Thank you, Bellae600 for your kind words. If you're listening, shoot me a note and I will send a fun Podcast Posse Package over to you, Bellae600, with some gifts. Do you want a Podcast Posse Package too? Leave that review and you just might get one. All right, enough of that review stuff. Let's get going on today's topic.

We're going to talk about one of the biggest mistakes that I see Ops Managers make along their Lean practice. In episode nine, I shared my thoughts on what I think Lean folks get wrong about Ops Managers. Today, though, it's time for you Ops Leaders and I have a heart to heart on what I think is one of the top mistakes that Ops Managers make when they decide to use Lean thinking and working in their operation and leadership. Okay, so you're an Ops Leader, and somewhere in your leadership team, folks have figured out that Lean thinking can make work easier and better, which leads to improved flow, better metrics, and more value. Maybe you were the decision-maker on that, or maybe someone else learned this and has now engaged you in the practice as well. There may even be varying levels of agreement. Some may be more passionate than others but you believe in the value enough to want to practice Lean thinking and working and so - I'm going to use air quotes here, ready? - and so, your "Lean transformation" has started.

You may have an outside consultant that is helping you out. You may have a continuous improvement team that has some expertise. Or maybe each value stream or department has selected a continuous improvement lead who's going to the workshops and taking the training so that they can learn Lean tools and processes at a deeper level as they build their own expertise, whether it's a formal role or an add on to their regular role. Regardless of which scenario you may find yourself in, this is the start of one of the biggest mistakes I see Ops Managers make in their Lean practice. You ready for it? Here it is.

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One of the biggest mistakes I see Ops Managers make in their Lean practice is that they outsource it. They outsource Lean thinking, Lean leadership, and continuous improvement to the CI person or the CI lead or the CI department or the quality department. They expect someone else to lead improvement and be responsible for improvement in their area. And Ops Leaders, listen up, that's not cool.

Let's think about the role Ops Leaders play in our organizations for a minute. So our team leads and frontline supervisors have the most direct levels of interaction with team members day in and day out. With the people who are making products or delivering services, the ones who are creating value for customers. Team leads, frontline supervisors, you're the ones who have the biggest impact on the culture team members experience and how they work. You're the key to all of that. Our Ops Managers are the ones developing team leads and frontline supervisors. That means Ops Managers, you're the people who are responsible for what type of experiences team members have with their leads and supervisors. And these experiences, these interactions, these relationships, this is what then drives the outcome.

And hey, all you Ops Directors, VPs and COOs, you're setting priorities, setting direction, and setting tone. And you're developing managers' capabilities to lead their teams and to lead their leaders. You play critical roles in our organizations. That means the decisions you make and the actions you take will determine how successful you and your operations teams are at learning and engaging in Lean thinking to make work easier and better so that you can create more about you. That's why when you outsource the responsibility of leading improvement to someone else, it's one of the biggest mistakes you can make. When you outsource Lean, when you rely on others to drive improvement for you, you're doing a few things. You're sending a clear signal to everyone on your team that it's not a top priority. That it's an add-on, not something integrated into how we work. You're missing out on the incredible influence that you have and expecting someone with a different or potentially even lower level of influence to bear your responsibility. Essentially, you're passing the buck. Now, I'm going to pause here for a minute and jump up on the soapbox because here's what I want to say.

When you outsource other responsibilities, it's equally disconcerting. When you expect Recruiting to find team members for you and you don't own it, or when you expect HR to deal with issues instead of owning it yourself, or when you expect the safety coordinator to be responsible for safety in your area or your line or your division, that's not okay either. We, of course, want to engage with experts to support us. Our recruiters and HR generalist and the safety coordinators and improvement practitioners, they're experts. We want to partner with them, but we don't throw it over the fence to them. We still have to carry ultimate responsibility and ownership. It doesn't mean doing everything yourself, but it does mean that you're the one - you're the guy, you're the gal. So what does it mean then when I say, "You need to own it. You need to take responsibility for it"?

Well, here are a few areas you can look at. Number one, your message. What does your messaging, both what you say and how you say it, lead team members to believe? Number two, your priorities. Not just on your messaging, but on your actions. What do your decisions and actions say about how you prioritize purposeful improvement and whether you're out front owning it and leading it? Number three, your

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knowledge and learning. How are you increasing your knowledge about how to better lead your team and improve work through scientific thinking and systematic improvement?

Look, I don't expect you to be the number one expert. Our improvement professionals and experts have a role to play in supporting Ops Leaders. But are you actively increasing your knowledge and understanding? Are you reading the books and going to the workshops and listening to the podcasts? Yeah, like this one. Thanks for listening. And are you learning from doing? Are you taking action? Are you applying what you've learned and learning through iteration beyond just the classroom? And remember, when we practice Lean thinking in leading our operations, it's not just in the technical how-to of Lean and how we work. Yes, we need to practice our problem solving. Yes, we need to practice our root cause analysis. Yes, we need to practice Visual Management, all of those things. We also need to learn about how to better lead our teams.

So we don't just go in and look at Tier 1 meetings and learn about the technical aspects of those. We also figure out how can we improve learning and our knowledge and our relative action based off of what we learn and know about how we interact with people to engage people. How do we engage people in Tier 1 meetings? Not just what are the technical pieces of Gemba walks, but how do we ask good coaching questions? How do we interact with people to build trust and commitment? What is your knowledge and your learning, and how are you actively working to improve that, both in the Lean side and the leadership side?

And number four, your example. How are you integrating this thinking into your own work? Are you expecting your team to practice 5S on the floor, but you're not doing it in your own work area? And I don't mean just your desk, I also mean your desktop, your processes for how you're managing, and all of the things going on. Have you integrated standard work and PDCA problem solving and failing forward in your own work? Or are you just doing that for the stuff on the floor, the processes on the floor, the workflow on the floor? Are you asking for help from the experts, from the people who know more than you and saying, "Hey, come and tell me, come in encouraged me, come and share your ideas and perspectives. I'm open to different ways of thinking"? Because we're asking our team to do it. Are you doing it about your own work?

So when I say, "Own it, take responsibility for it, lead it", I want you to look at four areas:

1. Your message
2. Your priorities
3. Your knowledge and learning and
4. Your example

And here's a tip: as you look at these areas, be sure to consider frequency and consistency in your evaluation.

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All right, quick recap. As I discussed in episode nine, there are some misconceptions that I think some improvement folks have about Ops Managers. But I also see too many Ops Leaders making this critical mistake - this mistake of outsourcing the responsibility of improvement to someone else, or to some other department, and that is a critical error. As Ops Leaders, we have a significant level of influence with team members. And that carries with it a burden to own and lead improvement. So evaluate your level of leadership by assessing your message, your priorities, your knowledge and learning, and your example.

So here's your next step. You see, this whole topic of leadership and ownership and responsibility, it's one of those things that shouldn't be hidden in the darkness of our minds and our own thoughts. We need to shine a light on how we are doing individually, and how our leadership teams are doing collectively. So your next step is not just to evaluate independently, but to begin a conversation with your peers, other Ops Leaders, team members and support partners that you work with. Share this episode with them and then start a dialogue. You might be surprised at what comes out of this dialogue, particularly if everyone commits to being vulnerable and transparent. Do you have the courage to start this conversation? I sure hope so. And with that, I'll talk with you next week.

If this episode of Lean Leadership for Ops Managers spoke to you, and you'd like to engage in a conversation about where you stand today, and how your Ops leadership team can better lead their teams and own improvement, you can schedule a call with me by emailing me at jamie@processplusresults.com. We'll hop on a quick 15 to 30-minute call to discuss your vision and your current state. No pushy sales. Just a conversation.