

## Leader Standard Work with Mike Wroblewski | 029

This is it. The Lean conversation I wish I had heard 10 years ago. Buckle Up.

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 managers do I have a treat for you. We're talking about leader standard work today with Mike Wroblewski. And let me tell you, this is an episode, you've got to hear.

You know how most episodes you tune in and take one or two ideas away. Well, as I listened to Mike during this conversation just about everything he said was something I wanted to write down, underline star on my paper.

And what's super cool is that while we're talking about leader Standard Work, what you hear, really kind of applies to a bunch of other things too. So, go ahead. Listen to the episode now and then go back to the podcast page, get the transcript or get the blog that has the summary, you're going to use, you're definitely going to want to bookmark this one. So you can find all the info at [process plus results.com](https://processplusresults.com), forward slash podcast, and this is episode 29.

Now, I also want to let you know that Mike Wroblewski and I are both teaching workshops at the Lean Frontiers Lean Coaching Summit in August of 2021. Some of my favorite facilitators will be their teaching as well. People like Dorsey Sherman, and Deondra Wardelle. This is a summit fully focused on leadership, so consider joining us. I'll put the link to the summit in our show notes, and remember that's it <https://processplusresults.com/podcast>.

All right, let's dive in to lead our standard work with Mike Wroblewski, who brings to this conversation, more than 30 years experience in Kaizen practice.

**Jamie:** Today I'm excited to have Mike Wroblewski joining the show. Mike, welcome.

**Mike:** Thank you. Thank you for inviting me. This is gonna be a good discussion.

**Jamie:** I thought of you because we're talking about leader standard work today. And I can remember when I was first exploring this topic and learning about it I watched something on Gemba Academy. You were talking with leaders about what are the things that are most important for leaders to do. Kind of all this people development stuff and all those things.

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And then you asked this question: “when you first get into the play at what do you do?” Answers were oh I make coffee, I check my email, and it was just really highlighting this disconnect of, you know what we think is important for us to do as leaders versus what we end up kind of getting stuck into actually doing.

**Mike:** Absolutely that is a problem and something that we can talk about.

**Jamie:** Well, before we jump into all of this. If you just let us know a little bit about your experience, and how you help organizations today.

**Mike:** Okay, certainly. Well my background I'm an engineer. I learned many of the topics of lean through Japanese senseis coming over to the United States back in the 80s. So I learned everything from: Let's do the seven waste, let's eliminate some of the waste, let's get flow value stream mapping, Kaizen events of course were a big tool that we used to emerge ourselves basically into Lean thinking. I actually now formed a company where I can help people understand how they can actually make this part of their culture, and then I coach people on how they can be a better lean thinker.

**Jamie:** Well, fantastic. Alright so today we're talking about leader standard work. Why don't you kick it off and let us know what really is this and how can it be helpful.

**Mike:** Most people probably know that there's a lot of information about this on the internet, there's books on it. But one of the biggest things is people don't know is what Leader Standard Work really is. So I found that when clients come and talk to me and say “hey we want this thing called leader Standard Work”, the misconceptions most of them have is about a form or a tool that they need to fill out. And it's really not.

That's just a tool to aid you in the actual leader Standard Work. The leader Standard Work is the activities that you need to do to help monitor the process to make sure that you're improving the process. So what are those activities that you do to help you do that. And to sustain that effort. That's what Leader Standard Work really is.

**Jamie:** When you say activities that you do to sustain and improve or to check that were sustaining and improving the process, what are examples of those activities might be?

**Mike:** Oh there's plenty of examples of that. First off is going on a gemba walk, that would be one activity. Go and see for yourself. Go monitor the process, find out what the standards are. Are you following the standards, where there's room for improvement. That's one element. Having huddle meetings is another thing within Leader Standard Work. Another activity could be one on one coaching that you should be doing with all of your employees and direct reports. So those are just three examples of simple things that you should be doing.

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Another missing piece, very simply, is what are you doing personally to make an improvement? You should be doing Kaizen every day.

The whole idea about leader standard work is these are activities that you should do to help strengthen and build your culture as a lean thinker, and to help your company become a lean thinking company. And we just don't do that as part of our daily habits.

So to make it a habit, we have this thing called leader standard work where we actually schedule appointments in our, in our day in our planner, however you wish to do it to force yourself or remind yourself that these are things I should be trying to do every day. And this tracks that progress toward trying to build that habit of doing those activities that's really what we mean by leader standard work.

**Jamie:** Okay, fantastic. So I'm hearing it a lot here and if I try to start to unpack some of this . . . When I hear people talk about leader standard work, we want to get the systems in place and the forms that you were talking about. . . You say hey clients are coming to me saying I want the forms and I want this thing. What's so bad about that.

**Mike:** Well there's nothing bad about it because that form is basically a tool to help you put on paper, you're trying to accomplish. But we start at the very beginning. I asked clients "why do you want to do leader standard work?" And I get that quiet crickets. It's like well, aren't we supposed to be doing it because that's lean thing to do. So check I need to do leader standard work. Check I need to do this.

No, there should be a need why you do leader standard Work, and usually it's along the lines of something like, well I don't have the habits built as a leader to do these activities, it's not part of what I normally do, and to help me make that a habit leader standard work is a tool or an approach to help you get that habit built to strengthen it.

And then I say, alright, so what should be in your leader standard work? And of course the great question is what are your problems, what problem are you trying to solve with this tool?

Ah, so tell me what your problem is, because again, we're trying to build problem solving skills, both individually and within your team. So let's focus on that. And then the other thing I try to guide them toward is, let's just start with one thing. One thing you'd like to do to improve your daily habit, not all of them, because it becomes overwhelming for most people to try to tackle everything. So pick one thing like maybe it's gemba walking. Let's focus on that skill as a habit of behavior and doing it well. And then you can add other things as you go so that's how I usually begin the journey of a leader standard work discussion.

**Jamie:** I do see folks get hung up on leader standard work because "it's supposed to be" . . . what you read . . . It's supposed to be this tiered system and then this layer checks on this layer and it's this whole

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thing. And so I think sometimes we get stuck because we look at it and that's what we think. And so that it just kind of sits out there's this thing we want to do.

**Mike:** Yes and everybody wants to jump to that, and you have to build just like everything else you have to build your habits you got to build your skill, you have to build your knowledge so I always start with. Don't worry about coaching with this yet, don't worry. As far as using this as a tool, don't worry about the tiered.

I would like each individual to practice this skill and understand it first. And that's why usually I introduce this as senior leaders first. I said, you Mr CEO Miss CEO, you're going to see how this tool works, and if that does help you then go to the next level and then we're going to start helping you teach others and tier that in.

**Jamie:** Alright, so how does it go then if you when you say, "Oh hey you senior leader, let's start with you." What's the response usually?

**Mike:** Sometimes that's like, what do you mean me. What do you mean I have to start it. So, that usually is not well received, because it's usually something that I delegate to others. But I say, I'll help you with this. You're gonna stumble. You're going to make mistakes. You're going to fail at this, but we're going to practice each day and as we go through it, you'll be stronger at it. So, get rid of, you're gonna look like you don't know what you're doing. Let's practice it and learn it.

**Jamie:** Okay, so I love this idea then is that we start individually, we build the habits, see how it helps us before we're ever talking about where else it might be helpful.

**Mike:** Exactly. And if we've mastered that part or at least get knowledgeable about it, then we can start looking at how to strengthen the tiering and then get to the next level where this becomes a great teaching and coaching tool that helps you help others.

**Jamie:** Okay, so when I . . . the first time I tried leader standard work and we started with the first level leaders, maybe not the best idea.

**Mike:** Well, maybe because what will happen is . . . their supervisors or managers are not engaged in doing this and don't know what to do with it. So all these people are doing this and then after a short period of time, they're saying, "Well, why do I have to do this?". And then it just falls on the wayside and it just goes in the drawer and they don't do it anymore, so it usually just stops.

**Jamie:** Yeah, it was definitely a lesson in what not to do.

**Mike:** Well, that's the way we learn, right?

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**Jamie:** That's right. That's right. So let's say I'm listening to this and I'm like hey, I really like this idea of, you know . . . I've discovered a problem I'm not spending my time with developing people I want to be able to spend more time with that and I keep just pushing it off to the side. And so I've decided I want to try leader standard work to help me with that. What do I do? What's my step here?

**Mike:** So you identified a problem so we're gonna add PDCA to do the exact same thing to solve a problem using that approach. So one of the things is to understand the problem and get to the root cause, right.

So, one of the things you need is collecting data. So that's where the actual form comes into handy, because it's not just a planner checklist I've done that activity. But you plan to say at 9:30, I'm going to do a coaching session, and you found that you didn't do it at 9:30 so you check that. But I also would like to see or encourage that you put why did you not do it at the time that you weren't able to do it. What interfered? What was the roadblock? What was the thing that caused you to not do it?

And as you start collecting the data and reviewing what were the blocks or the things that prevented you from doing it, now you'll start gathering data as to what are the things that interfere with me. So one example could be. I schedule the, the one on ones too early in the day, because things crop up that caused me to get started we have rough starts, maybe we want to change the time that we want to do a coaching session, because of the things that happen normally in our busy work life, so that data will help guide you toward the root cause and that root cause will help you decide what solution you want to do.

**Jamie:** So what you're saying is leader standard work is not a compliance activity.

**Mike:** No it's not at all. Right, exactly.

**Jamie:** And it really is just like when we think about visual management looking at we need both the expected and the actual for it to really be meaningful. That's really what we're talking about here too.

**Mike:** Yeah, absolutely. You expect a certain time you're going to do a certain activity, and then did you do that at the time you appointed. So it's a planning activity, and then it's a tracking activity, and then it is a reflection activity.

And that brings us to another thing that's usually missing in leader standard work is reflection. Do you have time that you say what happened and how can I make it better? That reflection of why that activity didn't work. And then what are you going to do about it?

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**Jamie:** So if I'm an executive out there, thinking about, oh we should do leader standard work that way I can see and measure and make sure my managers are doing the right things from a compliance standpoint then I'm going about it all wrong.

**Mike:** Yes, absolutely. I believe you are going about it all wrong because this is not a compliance activity at all. This is about what do we do as a leader during the day. Are we focused on the right things. And it was just helping guide us toward that direction.

**Jamie:** All right, so if I'm a manager listening to this. I've heard everything you said. I went and I started my process. I feel like I'm learning a ton about it. Now my team leads or supervisors or managers that are on my team are saying, "Hey, what is this thing you're doing. We want to get in on that." And I actually have a group of leaders on my team that are interested in pursuing this, what would be your recommendation for those folks.

**Mike:** Well that's actually the best thing because there's interest. So if there's that interest, then you start at the very beginning, why are you interested in doing this, what do you think it will help solve for you. And then here this is my experience and let's share it and let's try it. Just baby step through and get them to do one thing at a time, then coach them. So that's how you would introduce it to others.

**Jamie:** And so if it's this team team of supervisors team lead whatever. So you have this team of leaders, they're all in similar roles. Does their leader standard work need to be the same?

**Mike:** Well, no, they don't. Why, why would they not be the same. What do you think?

**Jamie:** I think that it's a learning process to solve a problem and so you'd want to have that individually.

**Mike:** It's the process of it. And then perhaps maybe other people have different problems. So if that's the case, let's help them solve their problem, not have to make it generic. So therefore the form does not have to be exactly identical. It doesn't have to be this is the thing everybody must do. Although I agree that things like gemba walk everybody should do. Everybody should do coaching so there's some standard to that of course. But everybody's going to be at different levels of application everybody's gonna have different problems to solve. So the tool should work for them.

**Jamie:** Speaking of the tool, do you recommend a form or something different? Is it just make it whatever is gonna work for them?

**Mike:** Whatever will work for them. If you're using a planner on your computer use that. If you're using an actual form that's on PowerPoint or word or that you've created, and it's on paper fine. Although there's no specific subscribed "this is the form you have to use" . . . There's elements when the form that should be standard should have tasks that are part of the culture. Like gemba walks or coaching or those things.

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Those tasks can be listed at a certain time you're going to do. And then you should track either red or green or a check mark however you want to do it. Did you do that task or not? And then the most important thing to me is: What did you learn and what were the outcomes of that plan? So yes you were able to do it. No you were not able to do it. Why were you not able to do it. If I did have a coaching session, what notes came out of that coaching session. That's really the important part. So if your tool, whatever you use, doesn't have that portion of it please add that to that. That notation, I think that's really key.

**Jamie:** All right, so making sure we have a place for the comments or the notes of here's what happened or what contributed or whatever those notes are. Then making sure I have a reflection process in place, what did I learn.

**Mike:** Yes, I agree. I think that's exactly what we need.

**Jamie:** Okay. Awesome. All right, so I'm loving all of this, this is like such a good insight that I really think is missing sometimes when we go Google searching leader standard work.

**Mike:** Yes, there's a lot of stuff out there. There's good stuff and there's not so good stuff. So yes, learn about it, try it and experiment with it. One thing that people really don't do a lot of and I do promote Of course, is it's good to have a guide or a coach when you're going through this process. Because you're going to have more questions later. And sometimes it's hard to, to learn this activity or any of these activities by yourself. So having a good person to mentor you helps you.

**Jamie:** So then, what else do you think we should know like tips or pitfalls. What else should I know or keep in mind when I'm thinking about leader standard work.

**Mike:** A couple of things. One is focus on which of the activities you think are most important. And place that in your standard work and practice that. You are going to forget, or you're going to stumble through it, and each day is a new day to try again.

And then one of the other things is make sure that this is not an activity where you're blaming people. So don't blame other people. Don't blame yourself. Blame the process. What in the process is going on that's not successful and practice that focus. So again, don't make it part of a blame activity.

Just go have fun with this. It is not supposed to be a big task that's burdensome. This is really supposed to help you become better. So if we're focusing on becoming better and using this tool, go with the approach that I'm going out to the shop floor I'm going to gamba I'm going to wherever work is happening. And all I'm trying to do is understand more about the processes that are there. And I'm going to focus my energies to make it easier to work. That's really what this leader standard work is all focused toward.

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So have fun with it, enjoy it. It's all a journey. So enjoy the journey of trying to implement things to make things better and make work easier.

**Jamie:** Oh my goodness, I love that we're saying go have fun with it. Get out there, make work easier and better. Perfect. All right, last step. If somebody wants to maybe learn more from you or about you. What's the best way for them to connect?

**Mike:** Well, I'm on LinkedIn, so you certainly can connect with me on LinkedIn and message me there. I can certainly offer my email address to you. You have that so anyone wants that they can contact you or use the email, and I'd be glad to help anybody throughout their journey, no matter where they are on the journey to help through it so that's probably the best.

**Jamie:** All right, well we'll make sure we put a link to your profile in the show notes so folks can connect. And I'd actually also encourage folks to check out Mike's book, *Creating a Kaizen Culture*. It's actually one of my favorite books out there. It's quite highlighted and panned and dog-eared and all of those things. So we'll link to that as well.

**Mike:** Yes, thank you for that. Yes, please. If you want to read the book, I certainly think I'd recommend it. It's got some good information in it.

And I believe you and I are being together at the lean coaching summit in August. We'll be able to see each other directly then. But yeah I encourage people to come out to the summit and learn more from us.

**Jamie:** Yeah, great, fantastic. we'll put some of the information linking there too so you can come out and learn more that'd be great.

Oh my, so freaking good. I can't give you all of my takeaways because I would basically repeat the whole episode. But here's what I'm gonna do, I'm just gonna walk through some phrases that I wrote down. And when I do this, I want you to think about how this applies to leader standard work, and how it really applies to any of the tools we might choose to use, like visual management or gemba walks, or daily meetings. They're all processes that create the learning. They're not a thing to do. Right. Quote unquote a thing to do.

Alright ready. Here are some phrases that I wrote down.

Leader Standard Work is actually the activities, not the tool.  
The tools are meant to help you build a habit.



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- And the habit should help you solve a problem.
- You want to get started with yourself. Not the leaders on your team.
- This is a process you do first, not that you do to someone else.
- And you don't have to go all in, start with one thing.
- When you make your tool, whatever that is. make sure it has a method for planning for tracking and for reflecting.
- Consider getting a coach or a guide.
- And don't start by trying to build a whole leader standard work system. Instead, use it as a process to build habits, skills and knowledge as you improve and solve problems.

Oh, how about that. These are like messages that ops managers and lean practitioners and everyone out there really needs to hear. I love this. This is just so awesome. Such good stuff.

All right, so I always want to leave you with your one next step. And so here's your one next step.

I really want you to reflect on this episode. You might even want to listen to it again, but really reflect and ask yourself a question. Whether this question is about leader standard work, or some other tool that you're implementing. Maybe you're trying to do Kanban pulls or daily meetings or 5S.

Whatever it might be that you're trying to put into place today or recently started or about to start. I want you to reflect and ask yourself this question:

Given everything you heard about how Mike talk through leader standard work, are you approaching the tool or the initiative you're working on in the way that he described?

And what's different? What's different with the way he described it, versus the way you're actually going about it?

What a great reflection question.

Now, next week, we're gonna dive deeper into leader Standard Work. I'm gonna share my first experience and teach you all the things not to do right you're gonna get to learn from my failures and guide you on some things that you can do instead.

And remember, you can get all the shownotes at <https://processplusresults.com/podcast/>. And be sure to check out that Lean Frontiers Coaching Summit where Mike and I will both be in fall of 2020. Until next time.