

Fostering an Inclusive Environment With Deondra Wardelle | 035

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.

Jamie V. Parker

Today we welcome Deondra Wardelle. We're going to talk about the "#RootCauseRacism Movement". What is that all about and how Deondra is really leading this effort to use Continuous Improvement and Lean thinking toward the problem of systemic racism.

We are going to talk about D.E.I. What does that mean? What is the difference between diversity, equity inclusion? How do we get those mixed up sometimes and why does it matter? Just both from a personal individual perspective as well as from a business perspective.

This will help you connect those dots of how we treat people and the kind of environment we create as leaders. . . How does that translate to business results.

Finally, Deondra is going to share specific steps that operations executives and operations managers can take to foster Inclusion in their work environment.

Jamie V. Parker

Today I am excited to welcome my friend Deondra Wardelle to the show.

Deondra Wardelle

Hello Jamie, How are you?

Jamie V. Parker

I am great. It's so good to talk to you again. This is exciting because you are right in the middle of a Root Cause Racism series right now. I guess it will be a couple of weeks from when people listen to this but I know with all the swirling activity going on.

Deondra Wardelle

Absolutely. Matter of fact just like you said we are right in the middle of the series. We have a total of Nine blogs posted. Our last two blogs posted today. We also recorded the webinar as a closing to the series. So we are right at the peak of it.

Jamie V. Parker

Thank you for taking some time out in the middle of all that. We will make sure we get all the information shared for that today as well.

Why don't we start off and introduce ourselves to our listeners. Particularly those that haven't met you. Tell us about you. Your work and some of the focus series that you have.

Deondra Wardelle

First of all, thank you for inviting me to be one of your guests. You do amazing work in the space of Lean and developing leaders it's an honor to be on with you today.

My name is Deondra Wardelle. Like Jamie I too am a person who is in the Lean profession. Developing managers, developing people. I have been doing this type of work for almost for 20 years now. Had a number of leadership roles, work in human resources, training, education and development. Most recently I worked with a non profit where I was a Chief Strategy Officer.

Now I am on my own as a consultant. Living my dream, my passion. What I do is I use Continuous Improvement, Lean. I work with individuals and organizations to help them, guide them and hold their hand along the way as we work towards achieving their goals or any dreams of vision they may have. In addition to that I also use Continuous Improvement in the space of addressing systemic structural racism different issues within our community. I do that work through a project. In a movement that I call #rootcauseracism.

Jamie V. Parker

Our first conversation was somewhere maybe around April of 2020. Somewhere around that time frame. Even though it hasn't quite been a year it still seems like ages ago.

Deondra Wardelle

It really does. When you started your introduction you said that "I wanna introduce my friend Deondra" I'm like it's great to be on here with my friend Jamie. I feel like we've known each other for forever and it's hard to believe that it hasn't been quite a year yet.

Jamie V. Parker

I love that about just the community and the relationship, we are talking about people and this is human experience. Let's dive in. In the middle of #RootCauseRacism series. I think this is the third series within that movement since your first one started. Why don't you start of and tell us what is it all about and how did you initiate that

Deondra Wardelle

Last year, in 2020 amidst all of the social unrest. The injustice that we watch played out on our screens right in front of us. There were two incidents in particular that crushed my heart. Being a Black woman there are things that I experience over my lifetime. There are things that my loved ones have experienced that relate to inequality and injustice in various degrees and forms.

It's something about Brionna Taylor's murder. One because she is from my hometown. She bears a striking resemblance to my youngest niece who was like a daughter to me. Her murder really troubled me. And then when George Floyd was murdered I just kept asking why do these things keep happening?.

I am more vocal about these issues on my personal facebook page. I was commenting and I would in every post with #RootCauseRacism. Because the question I was asking was with all that we know about Lean. With all that we know about Continuous Improvement.

When there's a problem or an issue we take the time to get to the root cause. Understanding why things or a process is happening or working the way it is.

That's one of the key steps that we need to take. In terms of finding a solution and identifying counter measures to counteract whatever it is that we see that weren't comfortable with.

As things continue to progress throughout 2020. Especially in the summer. We begin to see numbers of protests. I said "How Can I get involved?" "How can I do something".

Linkedin became my street of protest. I said whatever following I have. Whoever will pay attention to me-- at that time I was in a Vice President role and connected with people from different backgrounds. I said if people hear me as a Black educated woman with a college degree in an executive position. Who also is in a different continuous improvement space and spoken in different conferences.

If I'm talking about my fear and my concern perhaps it will put a face to what people see on TV and they will be able to connect. I did receive some responses that were a little unkind. Typically I don't let words trouble me. But one comment in particular rattled me. Because this was someone who was making unkind comments and this person is a member of the Lean community.

That threw me off more than anything because a lot of what we teach in the Lean community is about going to Gemba, listening, gaining understanding and this individual is jumping to conclusions. From that other members of the Lean community began to post on their own pages about their support of the Black Lives Matter movement and support of the point that I was making.

As a result I began to get connected with other people. One of which is Mark Graban. He invited me to share on his blog Leanblog.org. From that invitation. He and I worked together. We collaborated along with Karen Ross and some other members of the Women in Lean.

Because what I wanted to do was a blog series. I wanted to do a theme around the 8th of August celebration and other things about how we got to where we are in terms of race relations. Not only in America but globally. Because it is a global concern and issue.

From that we did our first blog series where we wanted to do a deep dive and understand some of the things we see as relates to injustice and policies that are not equitable. Areas of government, in education, healthcare and business. What are the small things that we can do to start making a dent to dismantle structural racism. Using continuous improvement as a guide for that.

So that's how it all started. After that series the response was sometime that I would never imagine. "This is a movement" so we started the root cause racism website and decided this is what I wanted to focus on full time because this is so important and meaningful to me.

Jamie V. Parker

It really is a movement and I love this idea of using this principle of continuous improvement because they work on all areas. And bringing this to the forefront and helping people connect, creating that vulnerability and transparency. Making this idea for open conversation more accessible for folks.

Deondra Wardelle

It starts with a conversation. None of us is an expert. We are all on this journey trying to figure things out. You will never hear me openly in any space talking about what it feels like being a Black woman at work. What it feels like to be a Black woman in any space. You just would not hear me talking about that. I don't want to bring attention to myself in that way.

But what started happening is my friends from various backgrounds particularly my white friends started reaching to me -- Deondra I have questions. I want to talk to you, I'm concerned about you, how are you doing? Are you OK?. not any of us have the right answer but it started a conversation and seeking to understand.

That's a key part of the work too. We have to get to these social media sites where people are debating and arguing back and forth. And getting back to conversation where we can talk, learn, discover and learn that we are on this journey together.

Jamie V. Parker

Over the last year there has been a lot of conversation around D.E.I. (Diversity, Equity, Inclusion) in our workplaces. What does that really mean? When you hear the term DEI What are the things that skipped over? I'm concerned that it becomes a buzz word and that the meaning behind it can sometimes get lost.

Deondra Wardelle

Trying to understand Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion people have questions about what is the difference between equity and equality. A lot of this starts with awareness, education, taking time to learn and discover.

Diversity can be expressed in a number of forms, it could be race, ethnicity, gender, gender identity, sexual orientation, socio economic status, language, culture, religious commitment, abilities, it's a number of things. So they recognize the different types of forms diversity can take.

Equity is an equal opportunity for everyone. Means not discriminating against someone because of their ways, of their color, their marital status or what have you. But what I think people know is that there is a difference between equality and equity.

Equality gives everyone the same number of resources. While equity is ensuring that everyone has the opportunity to be successful. I don't know if you saw this image--- three individuals watching a baseball game and there's a fence in between these three individuals.

These three have different stature. One person was tall enough to see the game without any obstacles. Another person has a box to stand on and is able to see it. The third person is standing on a box but a little shorter, he can't see the game at all.

So just giving everyone a box. A person who is already tall does not need the box. Versus someone who is shorter in stature having that box still unable to see the game. That's equality where everyone has a box.

Equity is about giving everyone an opportunity to see the game. So the tall person who doesn't need the box is ok, you are still watching the game. The person who's at middle height who may be struggling a bit to see the game having that 1 box helps them. But the person who's short on stature having 2 or 3 boxes elevates them so that they can see the game.

So everyone is enjoying the game. But what inclusion is about is ensuring everyone feels welcome. No matter their perspective. They will be respectfully heard. They are seen to be an individual who belongs.

That's what true liberation takes place. That image that I described the fence blocking people from seeing the game and giving the boxes so someone can see. Inclusion is about removing the fence altogether so that regardless of what your stature is you are able to take part of the game, you are able to be involved. And you can be successful.

That is all we should aspire to do in these spaces especially at work is where everyone feels like part of the team no matter what race, gender, religion, marital status, no matter what. They feel included and they feel welcome.

Jamie V. Parker

This is an interesting point that you are talking about because it can take an effort for each of those. Inclusion takes it really further. It's a positive act in order to create inclusion. The absence of aggressive racism does not equal inclusion.

Deondra Wardelle

Absolutely, that is one of the reasons why with root cause racism movement and even the work that I do with companies around diversity equity and inclusion. I always link in continuous improvement because it's that act. And from doing that's where behavior begins to change and this is a big undertaking change, It will not happen overnight.

But if you can work on one small piece, one aspect, one behavior change at a time and that is something you practice daily. It becomes a part of the behavior, that's when you see change take place.

The other thing you mention about how is it's an act. It's great that we have fabulous diversity equity and inclusion statements on our website. It is wonderful that we issue these great statements. It's great that we have unconscious bias training and all of those great things.

But what happens when we go back to our desks or we're in the break room around the water cooler and things are said and things that are not said. What happens when we are in zoom meetings where people struggle to feel included. Their voices aren't heard, their recommendations are being dismissed because of whatever part of who they are is being limited during the discussions. So it's those actions it's not about being intentional.

Jamie V. Parker

Most listeners are going to be operations executives, operations managers, plant managers . . . what makes inclusion so important for them in their work and organizations. How are these ideas of this interpersonal human situation and then business, work and management how are these intersects?

Deondra Wardelle

I had conversations with many managers who say " we don't want to get into that touchy-feely stuff, there's work that we need to do let's just focus on getting this work done"

No one is asking anyone to be touchy-feely. Diversity equity and inclusion have that diverse background of people to get a different perspective. Part of the webinar one of the participants was Paul Critchley. Who is doing some great work in the continuous improvement space. Talk about how anytime there's a value stream mapping event where you bring people from different parts of the process together the first

thing they say is “I never realized that’s the process operated for you”. it’s an eye opening.

Some of the best ideas are recommendations for countermeasures or improvements come from those who are closest to the process and those who are somewhat distant and coming in with a fresh set of eyes.

Just imagine when we have diversity, opinion, thought, representation and decision that we are making for our business, customers, product, and services that we have. If people would participate without any reservation if there is a trust. Inclusion is about creating an environment where everyone knows that they belong. When that happens workflows are more stable and things are more secure.

Safety being important in the workplace we don’t want any trespassers or any emotional trespassers. People should feel like “I can be myself at work”. As long as we are not doing anything that’s going to harm someone else or break a policy.

It’s the stability that it brings. Not only that when leaders interact with their team in such a way where respecting their input, hearing what they have to say and building their trust and being able to recognize the work. The team wants to get more involved because they know that they are being heard and not being dismissed.

When you have inclusion and you are showing that “hey your input, your involvement brings value”. When people feel a part of something, that helps with retention. People are less likely to leave to look for other places to work because they feel like they are part of the team, the solution, the success that the company is experiencing.

Jamie V. Parker

How do I help generate some of that?

Deondra Wardelle

It’s small things that people can do. Whenever you are in a meeting you have people who are quick to give input and very talkative, I’m one of those people. But then there are other people who are more quiet. If there is a discussion give everyone an opportunity to speak. You want to make sure that people have input. Ask people for their ideas and you respond to them.

Last summer it was hard for me to log in to those zoom meetings after watching whatever murder took place the night before. Or whatever new policy that came out restricting people who look like me. To have to go to work the next day smiling, happy, acting like everything was ok is difficult.

I remember getting into a zoom call after George Floyd was murdered. A person said “hey before we start talking today, Deondra how are you?” they took the time to check to see how everyone was. That meant

so much to me. They care about me as an individual, not just an employee.

To answer your question. As managers, keep lines of communications open. Especially now we are in this virtual space. Make sure that people have what they need to be successful. People might be struggling. As managers, be sensitive to that.

Create opportunities where people can give input on decisions that are being made or processes that are being updated. Another key thing is making sure that team members understand how the work they do everyday is connected to the strategic goal and the vision of the organization.

Helping employees see their value and their connection by doing something as simple as how employee performance management goals are set each year. Show them that this is how they are connected to what it is we are trying to accomplish. But not only that I want you to grow, develop, learn and have opportunities for advancement. Let that employee know that we want you here in this organization in this company.

Jamie V. Parker

So we know that there are COO, VP, and Plant managers out there who are now trying to talk to their team leads, supervisors, and managers about this bias. We all have unconscious biases. For some of them it almost may feel shielded. It's not a part of their everyday life. They may be in a less diverse area. They may not have as many experiences to hear or see directly. But at the same time they are in the leadership role. They have folks on their team that are different from them that they need to lead effectively. I'm sure there are uncomfortable conversations happening and it's important that they happen. Any thoughts on how to talk about biases in the workplace?

Deondra Wardelle

It is uncomfortable and it's going to be. This is something we are not accustomed to. This is a muscle we have never used before. Because of that with any change that we decide to make. It begins with that awareness that the change is necessary. It begins with education and practice.

Some organizations I worked with were predominantly white men. They are open and honest about not having a lot of exposure to diversity. However, that is not an excuse in the capacity in which they lead. They have an impact on new employees of diverse backgrounds. Or their companies are in communities where there's diversity.

Regardless of our background there is opportunity to become exposed to diversity. It can be reading a book, podcast, videos, webinar, movies, documentaries. There's all kinds of information out there. Being intentional that "this is how I grow up and what I know". I have to move beyond this and practice diversity equity and inclusion wherever my space is particularly as a leader.

It's such a sensitive topic because when you hear things like bias and privilege. Because I have not done

anything racist, don't group me in that category as being a racist. Inactivity is just as bad. We all have bias and for the most part we have privilege.

It's on us to be a leader, to lead boldly, to create those environments. Even when conversations may be uncomfortable we want to be respectful, we don't want to do any harm and we need to be transparent. I may not have all the answers but I do know that we are at this starting point in terms of what we are in diversity, equity and inclusion. And we need to do the work.

If you are at the table and everyone looks at you when you ask that question. The first question might be-- who can we invite to the table to be a part of this discussion? The good thing about being virtual now is we can hop on a zoom or call someone around the world and within moments they are in that space to help--be a part of those discussions. Sometimes we think it's more complex than it really is. Again it starts with awareness that you want to have those conversations.

The other thing that I want to share just an example is about heightening awareness for inclusion for Black people in the LGBTQ+ community. I recognize some of the pain that people are dealing with in the workplace as a result of intersectionality between race and sexual identity. What can I do to give a voice to the voiceless. I want to make things better, build trust and build relationships.

Jamie V. Parker

Just for me to realize those uncomfortable conversations. The fact that I could choose to not have them is a privilege. The fact that I even get a choice whether I want to address this issue or actively participate in this conversation or not is a privilege of mine. Leading to what you are talking about as leaders, the responsibility that we are carrying is that we cannot ignore this.

Deondra Wardelle

I always see this as a responsibility of leaders. Ensuring that there are opportunities for the people that they lead to be successful. For whatever organization they have that end user that they want to be delighted. We think about our customers as external and they are also internal. And those are our team members. Just like we want our customers to be delighted.

Coming to work you should not dread it. You shouldn't come being fearful of what may happen to me today. Because I use a cane, or I am of this size, or I have this religious belief. Those things are necessary hindrances to creating a space where people feel that they are successful and can do the job. We need to create spaces where people are inspired to be creative, brainstorm and bring great ideas. When you feel like you are included and heard those things will happen. And that's good for business.

Jamie V. Parker

As we wrap up, any points that we missed that you want to make sure to share today?

Deondra Wardelle

Yes! This is my main point. No matter what it is we are trying to accomplish as leaders it starts with two things.

One focusing on continuous improvement. Recognizing that this is a process that we needed to be methodical in our approach. Scientific thinking and really going through the steps of how do I get from current state to future state whatever we desire. Always look for opportunities.

Second is respect for people. The golden rule. Do unto others as you would someone to treat you. Honoring the humanity that it is in everyone. Recognizing that we all have differences. Instead of letting differences separate us let's use that to leverage and make things better. Come up with ways to collaborate. Being innovative accomplishes amazing things that we want as individuals and as organizations.

It will be challenging but get started with small things and continuously improve everyday. Show respect for people, it's all connected.

My favorite expression is "on to the next one" . It's about what's the one small thing you can do. Whatever big thing that we try to accomplish I want to introduce diversity, equity and inclusion.

Jamie V. Parker

For folks out there who want to learn more about the RootCauseRacism Movement and connect with you, where should they be going?

Deondra Wardelle

They can go to two places. First is my website <https://www.deondrawardelle.com/> You can connect with me on linkedin, follow me on twitter, on instagram, subscribe to my youtube page and facebook.

Then for the root cause racism movement that's the community work. And that's where everyone has the opportunity to get involved. It's <https://www.rootcauseracism.com/>

Again we are all in this together. If you have success on something i want to learn about.come write a blog or share an article, podcast or what have you.

Jamie V. Parker

Deondra thank you so much. It's been a pleasure. Any parting words for us today?

Deondra Wardelle

Jamie you are doing amazing work in this space of what you're doing with managers and leaders. I encourage you to keep on doing what you are doing. I enjoy your podcast and posts. I think you are a fabulous human being. And it's an honor to know you.

And to those people who are listening. Whatever it is that you are working on. Find one thing to get started, don't give up, keep moving on to the next one.

Jamie V. Parker

It's truly an honor to have Deondra on today. And to be part of what she is doing and help share the work that she and her community are doing.

As Deondra talked about, the next step is to process what you heard today.

Think through what this means for you and what is that one thing you can do to make things a little bit better.

Until next time.