

Getting and Making Real Commitments: Reliable Promising with Susan Reinhardt | 040

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.

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Have you ever been in a meeting and the boss or a colleague asks you to do something? They kind of assume it. So it's probably more like telling you to do something instead of asking. And maybe in your head you're thinking "there is no way I can get that done in time, or at least no way without sacrificing some other big priority". But you just kind of nod or you don't really say anything. You just kind of let it go like it was said, but I'm not getting into that right now.

Or maybe you're in a meeting and you think that everyone agreed on who was doing what by when, but the next week you come into that meeting and stuff is not done or there's confusion or you learn that not everyone is on the same page. No, that's not what you meant. I thought you meant this." Well, then you probably want to listen in to today's conversation.

In fact, you might hear some Weasel Words in today's conversation that are haunting your collaborative efforts.

Susan Reinhardt is joining us today to talk about the concepts of reliable promising or conversation for action that she uses in Lean applied in the construction industry and how that may help you.

Now for this episode, you probably want to head over to our show notes, just go to <https://processplusresults.com/podcast/> and then find this episode with Susan Reinhardt.

There you're going to be able to see images kind of depicting what Susan is talking about, as well as more information and links to dive in further. All right, let's go.

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Jamie V. Parker: [00:02:19] Today, I'd like to welcome Susan Reinhardt to the show, Susan. Thank you so much for joining us.

Susan Reinhardt: [00:02:25] Thanks for inviting me.

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Jamie V. Parker: [00:02:26] Well, let's kick off before we jump into all of our goodness today, tell us a little bit about who you are in the work that you do.

Susan Reinhardt: [00:02:35] I am an architect by profession. So I started quite a while ago in 1991 actually my first job was in Switzerland for a little in architecture firm. But then I came back to the States and I was working on successively larger projects. And I really got put into the project manager role pretty early. And I like to chase the details.

[00:02:57] So, you know, soon I was the classic Firefighter command and control and firefighter. So if there was a project that was failing or flailing, they would bring me in on it and I would right the ship. Or if they had a project that was going to be expensive or the owner was difficult, they'd have me do it from the beginning to make sure that it didn't go off the rails.

[00:03:21] So I got very interested in this and I started creating. I was kind of my own one man PMO Project Management Office, and I would start sending out to all my peers all these suggestions for how to put your drawings together and how to not be missing information and how to handle your consultants and what to do with your contractor and what to do on site and how to deal with the owner.

[00:03:44] And I really found out about Lean in my MBA. So I got an MBA in international management from Thunderbird School of Global Management, which was like the oldest international management school in the US. They introduced me to Lean and mostly in hospitals. And I just thought, whoa, I've been missing out on something here. And, you know, I've been chasing Lean ever since. And that led me to manufacturing classes and Lean.

[00:04:16] And then I said, well, how does this apply to architecture and construction? And they were deer in the headlights. Like, well, I think we consulted a roofing manufacturer once. Yes. In that. So I started searching. I found Lean Construction Institute. I started speaking there after I went the first time and had my own firm. And I have been trying to bring Lean into the building industry ever since. That's just how my mind works. It's great.

Jamie V. Parker: [00:04:45] Yeah, fantastic. Well, let's talk about that a little bit. So tell us a little bit about what it does mean when we say Lean in construction,

Susan Reinhardt: [00:04:54] We're Johnny come lately to this little game. You know, we are one of the only industries that since 1964 hasn't actually raised our labor productivity index. Unlike all the other

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industries, we're of course very fragmented. We are the originals and project based work. I hear of other people saying that sixty percent of my time is spent managing projects and people never train you how to do that, they just kind of promote you and say manage this. And as an architect, that's what I do.

[00:05:27] I have a project. I have many consultants. They are not part of my firm in general. They're all from different companies. And when I get to the contractors, they might have 50 different subcontractors on site. And those different subcontractors have all these vendors. And so when you look at projects, you might be building a five hundred million dollar headquarters or lab or university. And the owner, of course, is not really the owner. The owner has got all their user groups and their vendors that they use. And, you know, there's just a huge amount of information and aspirations to manage, not all of which are aligned.

[00:06:11] And a lot of decisions to be made. And you've got to get people marching in a row so that fragmentation is kind of the ultimate in project based work. And that brings us to Lean. I'm also a project management professional, but that was a little too top down to me. Yeah, I need the assistance of my builders and my engineers and I need to marshal that better rather than dictating which is sort of the command and control style for architects and superintendents on the job site.

Jamie V. Parker: [00:06:45] Yeah, when I think about when I hear you talk about this in construction. Right. And so from the architecture all the way through to product. It's almost like silos on steroids.

Susan Reinhardt: [00:06:57] It is Hyper fragmentation. It's not different departments. These are different companies. And if you hard bid everything, it's the lowest bidder. And, you know, you have pressures on designers that they got to get their designs out.

[00:07:14] So I might have for twenty five million dollar building, I might have one hundred sheets of thirty by forty two architectural in another hundred sheets of engineering and they've all got to mesh. And if they and and you can also build something the owner doesn't want so. How do you do that and there's safety issues. It's big and we have not traditionally handled it very well. Our projects are behind schedule and over budget.

Jamie V. Parker: [00:07:44] I'm so excited to talk about this. And for those listening that aren't in construction, I really want you to pay attention. Because when you think about it, if you're working in your organization, you're going to have cross cross-functional teams and things that are going across different departments. So here you go. If this is how we can do it when different companies are involved and you've got this level of complexity, then there's definitely something here to learn. So pay attention as we talk through this.

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[00:08:14] Now, in Lean construction, there's the full last planner system and the five layers or five levels of conversation, and we're going to link to all of your information, Susan. So, folks, listeners out there, if you want to learn more about that, you can follow those links, go to our shows, follow those links and get all the details on the last planner system.

[00:08:34] But thinking about those conversations involved in that, what I'd really like to focus on and hear about is those conversations and what really makes them different and how might they be different than a typical staff meeting or cross-functional meeting that we might go to today. So let's dig into that.

Susan Reinhardt: [00:08:55] So, you know, there's this whole system. But what's underlying that? It's like a lot of people talking at each other. A lot of commitments being made. How do you actually do that 50 way communication, how do you start.

[00:09:15] We like to say that nothing happens in human endeavor except through conversation. Before you invited me onto this podcast, it literally wasn't possible. Right. You opened up a new world. You made a declaration.

[00:09:31] And there is a man I have to give a shout out to Fernando Flores. Dr. Fernando Flores and Chauncy Bell and the notion of language action. So when we speak, we're actually calling into being a new way of work and how do we manage the conversation.

[00:09:54] I think you've been in staff meetings before where people are talking about an issue. They talked about it last week. Nobody really commits to anything. You think they did. Right. Or maybe you have an action item list and you said, "Ok, Jamie, you're going to do this. Susan, you're going to do this." And people say, oh.

[00:10:15] And then you come back next week, it's not done, it's not what you wanted to see it done as. And, you know, it's the problem.

[00:10:26] And I sit in these meetings with foremen and I come out of it two hours later. I said not one person made a commitment. In that meeting, do you realize that and they're like, well. What does that mean? So.

[00:10:41] You asked me to come on today and speak to something we refer to as Reliable Promising or Conversations for Action.

[00:10:52] Think of a sphere that's going around in a circle. You have a customer and he has a request. It could be: Build me a one hundred bed hospital tower. Or it could be: Get me a cup of coffee.

[00:11:08] And you have to prepare, right? You can't just, hey, build me that tower or get me the coffee. I mean, who is the performer? You're making the request of and a request is a very specific thing, right?

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You're asking someone to take care of something that concerns you. And when you do that, you make the request.

[00:11:31] The performer . . . I mean, how many people have had underlings say, oh, right, I'll get right on it, and they just run out the door and they do it and you're still standing there going. Do they understand what I actually was asking for, so we skip the next part, so we made a request, we prepared. We thought about what we wanted. You know, I want some coffee and I don't want the conference room coffee. I want Starbucks and I want the vanilla and all of this stuff. And I bought you drinks last night, so I think you should buy me a coffee.

[00:12:03] I mean, all of these requests come out, but then you got to clarify and negotiate the performers. Like, OK, So I think what you want is this and they start negotiating that it's you know, frankly, I bought you coffee all last week so that I thought you were paying me back with a drink or, you know, I just don't have time to go to Starbucks or, you know, they start to think about things before.

[00:12:30] They commit, You know, you can think, do I have the manpower to have the knowledge? Do I know what they're asking me to actually do? And if I can't do it, will I step up and tell people that's true? And only through that clarification negotiation, which may require conversations with others, especially your trades, your consultants, the funding organ for whatever you're doing, you can make an actual commitment.

[00:13:04] And when you commit, you make a promise to take care of these conditions of satisfaction, which you've negotiated together, and that has a date, so the customer is saying, I promise to be satisfied if you do this by this time. And the performer says, yes, I can commit to that and I will.

[00:13:23] So then they execute and at the end of that execution, they have to say, OK, this is my work, I've done it, and the customer has to declare that they are satisfied. How many times have you handed somebody something and they say, OK, thanks, and they go away. And you might even hear later. Oh, that wasn't the report I needed. I didn't use it at the meeting, but thanks. And so we really need to close that loop.

[00:13:51] And so when I am listening to people, I'm listening for that loop.

Are you prepared?

Did you make a request or you can make an offer.

Did you negotiate and clarify what it is in such a way that they're actually thinking about it.

When they went to perform it, who else did they have to bring in? And those are more conversations.

When it's done and something might change, so, you know, if something changes, are you communicating?

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But when it's done, are you actually declaring satisfaction?

[00:14:23] That seems like a simple thing, but there was a very long lead item on a project I was on. It was for a big infrastructure project. It was a big coupling for a large underground pipe.

[00:14:34] And it came in six months before they needed it. It was wrapped up for protection. They didn't have the equipment to unwrap it and wrap it up again. So they just checked a box. Six months later, they unwrapped it and realized it was not in the configuration they needed. So these things happen.

[00:14:54] Or a Superintendent will come in and say, you know, I told them the ground was going to freeze and they needed to protect the fire hydrant or the plumbing or something. I told them it needs to be done. I came in this morning, it's all frozen. I had to rip it out.

[00:15:09] And I just want to say, so who actually committed to do it? Did they know how did they know it was today? Did you see them do it at the end of the day three? And it's like, well, you know, people don't really have an answer.

[00:15:28] So this is what I'm looking for and I'm looking for weasel words.

Jamie V. Parker: [00:15:33] Weasel words.

Susan Reinhardt: [00:15:34] Weasel Words.

Jamie V. Parker: [00:15:36] What are weasel words?

Susan Reinhardt: [00:15:38] I am kind of the language police. Unfortunately, I am married to an English teacher, so I know how annoying that is. But I do look for language and I'm looking for promises. So which of these are actual promises?

[00:15:56] Somebody says, yeah, maybe I can get the windows here by August 15th.

[00:16:02] Or perhaps I will order them this week, I hope to have the dimensions I need by tomorrow.

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Jamie V. Parker: [00:16:10] Yeah, OK, I'm starting to hear this.

Susan Reinhardt: [00:16:14] I could get the windows here by August 15. It's in the schedule. That's a statement. You could. And then someone else says, yeah, sure, sure. I'll try to get the opening draft in.

[00:16:29] Or I hear an engineer. I plan to do the structural calculations and get you the beam sizes next week. Why doesn't he just say I will? And I'm listening, this is what I listen for.

[00:16:44] So what I want to hear, you know,

[00:16:46] I will get the windows here by August 15.

[00:16:50] OK, yes, I will get the windows here by August 15th if the architect gives me updated dimensions by Friday.

[00:16:59] I can't answer now, but we'll get back to you by Thursday.

[00:17:03] That's a promise. Because you have a date. If you say, well, I'll get back to you, that's nothing. They didn't promise anything. And sometimes the thing you need to let people say, and this is where we fall down on construction all the time, you need to let people say, no, I can't get the windows here by August 15th. We have a supply problem.

Jamie V. Parker: [00:17:27] Yes.

Susan Reinhardt: [00:17:28] And that's not the end of it. It's like, OK, so we wanted to start the interiors. Can we get temporary enclosures so we can start the interiors and drywall? And you have another conversation. And we get commitments now.

Jamie V. Parker: [00:17:48] I'm totally hearing all of this, I'm thinking back with our listeners and you can probably think back to the last meeting you were in and what type of language did you hear more of? And I bet it was those weasel words, right?

Well, that's my plan.

My goal is.

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I hope to.

[00:18:09] I can just think of myself using them to kind of give myself a little bit of wiggle room, you know, allowing for possibilities. Whereas even when you talked about these promises and used the words, yes, I will, there were some of those examples where you said, yes, I will if this happens.

Susan Reinhardt: [00:18:31] If God willing. And that's another conversation. You need the dimensions. OK, when do you need them? This architect, when are you going to get them to him? And these are constraints and we write it right up on the board. This is a task that's going to be constrained. This is what I need. This is when I need it and who's going to promise. And we sit there with a three second pause with our little pen who's going to whoo hoo!

[00:19:00] And we expect people to say, I will - even if we know who it is. I don't want the Super saying, OK, architect, you can do it by the tenth. Nobody made a commitment and we've had this issue. It's hilarious. But we had an architect there saying, well, we really need this request for information answered on the plumbing or we can't get going. Yeah, I'm working on it. I'm working on it. And they said, OK, well, let's put it down on the board. And so they did that.

[00:19:28] This is a task that's constrained. This is the information I need. This is who needs it. And I'm requesting it by this time. And they said, OK, so Susan, you said you'd give it to us and they're sitting there writing: When can you give it to us? And she stopped and she looked at them and she said: What RFI are we talking about?

[00:19:50] Because if you ask a yes, no question. That cycling negotiation loop, can I do it? Do I have the time to do it? How long will it take? Isn't there and people you ask? Yes, no question. This is my language policing.

[00:20:05] And they say, uh huh or no, everything's fine. Those are other words. So I never allow my supers to ask yes or no question. Say if you tried to start this task tomorrow, what would stop you? You don't say do you have everything you need?

Jamie V. Parker: [00:20:22] Yes, I love that question. I heard you say it earlier, too, by the way: "If you were starting this task tomorrow, what would stop you?" Love it.

[00:20:35] As we start to wrap up, let's say we've got a team out there, maybe an operations management team that is out there listening and they're going, gosh, you know what? We're not really making promises. We're thinking about our meetings and our discussions and our conversations. And we're not really making promises. And we want to start to shift to do that more. Any kind of tips, recommendations,

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things to watch out for that you would share as they start to shift some of the language in the conversation to be more action oriented.

Susan Reinhardt: [00:21:10] I think, you know, that whole notion of conversations for action, you can Google it, language action. There's a loop and you'll see it. It's like, how are we speaking to each other? Do we really know what we're asking for? And, you know, both the customer and the performer need to clarify things. If my message to you is unclear, that's on both you for not clarifying and on me.

[00:21:37] So what are the conversations we're having? Can we eliminate words like hopefully or a plan or things like that?

[00:21:46] Do we understand the concerns? You know, they're asking us to do something. It's pretty good to know why, so I think that entire conversation piece, which when we look at last planner we have spreadsheets and schedules and daily huddle, you know, weekly work plans and we have all this stuff. But those are artifacts of a conversation. That's the end result.

[00:22:14] We don't do a weekly work plan so we can have a spreadsheet. We do a weekly work plan so we know exactly where you are and what you need from me and what can release my work.

[00:22:23] Don't tell me it takes 15 days to do something. After five days in an area, can you move on and somebody else moves in? What do you need? Do you need every opening in the entire bed tower, Mr. Structural Engineer? Or you just need to know the ones that are bigger than 8 by 8 foot. It's a different conversation and I would say, yeah, hit that conversation for action.

Jamie V. Parker: [00:22:44] Fantastic. All right. So for our folks out there who want to learn more about this and maybe connect with you, where should they go? What's the best way for them to do that?

Susan Reinhardt: [00:22:55] The best way to do that, you can either. Just give me an email. I'm susan@yourleanproject.com Or you can look me up under Rhinehart Lean design And consulting,

[00:23:08] The best place to contact me, of course, is on LinkedIn. So I think you're going to put the LinkedIn connection that they can do that as well.

Jamie V. Parker: [00:23:18] Well, thank you So much for joining us today. Really fascinating stuff. And I think there's a lot to this idea of reliable promising and conversations for action.

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Susan Reinhardt: [00:23:28] Thank you.

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[00:23:32] Listen up, everyone. You are not going to believe this. So right after I hit the stop recording button with Susan and we were wrapping up and talking and I was going through next steps and guess what I said?

I said, well, I'll probably have my checklist completed on Monday so I can let you know if there's anything additional I need from you by then.

What?!? A Weasel Word!

"I'll probably have my checklist completed on Monday".

Within minutes of learning about it, right. Instead of making a promise or a commitment, I used a Weasel Word. Oh, my goodness.

[00:24:13] The good news is that I did catch myself afterwards. I was about two sentences after that. And I paused. I said, wait a minute, wait a minute. I just said probably. And I decided to rephrase it in the affirmative and make a commitment.

I will have my checklist completed by Monday. Now, here's the thing is that I didn't just change the word without the sentiment to go with it.

[00:24:37] So what happened is I actually had to pause and think: OK, am I comfortable making this commitment? Is this realistic? Do I have everything I need? And are there other priorities that I need to finish first? If I'm actually going to kind of put my word on the line, if I'm going to make a commitment? Well, that's really important for me to follow through. And I need to make sure and this really stood out to me because initially.

When I said "Hey, I'll probably have this by Monday", I didn't put a lot of thought into it. I was just kind of thinking through like, yeah, that probably sounds right. Right. But I didn't actually put as much thought into it.

And the moment that I kind of shifted to this affirmative where I was making that promise, I actually considered it more. Now, in this case, Monday was OK, so I was fine with it. But if I felt like that wasn't

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OK, then I would have said, oh, you know what? Let me let me say that I will have this done by Wednesday, for example.

And so it wasn't that I had to squeeze everything in. It just really kind of forced me to do more evaluation. And if this had been anything in a group work or maybe a cross-functional situation, I think it would have forced the conversation. Right.

[00:25:54] So it just stood out to me. I was dying laughing. I'm like, oh, my goodness. But it just really brought this lesson home for me. And I'll be interested in hearing from you what you find.

[00:26:07] Now, one quick reminder that this really only works if it's safe to say no.

[00:26:14] As leaders, we have to create an environment where someone can say no, I can't complete that by that time, because then we can have a conversation. We can better understand the obstacles. We can make informed decisions. But you just have to be careful that you're not creating a space of fear where people are making commitments and they're saying they will do something knowing that they can't.

[00:26:34] All right, here is your next step. The next meeting you go to, maybe the next few meetings you go to, I want you to listen for Weasel Words versus Promises or Commitments. Both from other people and from yourself.

How often are you and your colleagues kind of hedging your bets or making those statements in the gray rather than fully committing?

Now, once you get a feel for what's happening, then you can come back and revisit this conversation to decide if you want to do something about it.

Remember that you can see the image of the Reliable Promising Loop and get additional details and links at our show notes. So just head over to <https://processplusresults.com/podcast/>.

Until next time.