

Workplace Drama: How Mental Stories Impact Improvement Results | 041

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.

[00:00:29] Emotions, drama, conflict, resistance, people can be so difficult in the workplace, can't they? All right. Well, actually, people aren't being difficult. They're just being human. So today, we're going to start a conversation about what happens in our heads that impacts how we act and particularly in those types of situations where someone might feel a little bit of that eye-rolling drama. Here we go.

In Episode 39 Arnout Orelio talked about two different cycles running. He talked about the first one, something we're familiar with, PDCA or some sort of improvement cycle that you're using. And that's the technical problem solving cycle that we use in continuous improvement.

But Arnout said that there's the second cycle that's kind of running simultaneously at the same time that we tend to miss. And essentially, he says it's like basically if something happens and then you put it through your beliefs and what you believe about what happened makes you feel a certain way. And this emotion then gives you your behavior.

And in Arnout's direct words, he said, most of the time we ignore or don't see this second cycle. Well, I'm so glad he brought this topic up, because we are going to dive in.

Now, over the last 14, 15 years, I have heard this concept shared a number of different, but always kind of similar ways. And I want to walk through some big AHA's that I've had through that process. And it's going to be more than one episode. But I promise we're going to get really specific in each episode so that you can have a very specific take away.

[00:02:29] Now, let's start today by taking a little flashback back to the maybe the end of 2007, maybe the very, very beginning of 2008. I was a senior manager leading six stores in Washington, D.C. So I had six stores that I was responsible for. Now, I've always had a hunger for learning and getting better. So I was reading a book, and in the book I was reading, it was called Crucial Confrontations: Tools for Resolving Broken Promises, Violated Expectations, and Bad Behaviors. It was written by Kerry Patterson. And I think Joseph Grenny like a whole crew of people. Others like several authors. But they're also the folks that wrote crucial conversations and crucial accountability. So it's like a three part series.

Crucial Confrontations was actually my favorite and I think it's the one they might have discontinued. So if you can't find Crucial Confrontations, Crucial Conversations at work - the same basic stuff is there.

Anyways, I was sitting one evening back in the very end of 2007 or the very beginning of 2008, and I was sitting one evening reading this book and it got to a segment about mastering your stories.

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[00:03:42] The authors presented a pathway of how we act in confrontation. And it went like this. First, we see and hear, essentially something happens. Then we tell ourselves a story. That story causes us to feel a feeling and the feeling causes us to act. So the whole premise was that the stories we tell ourselves are often not completely true. We tend to make assumptions and fill in the blanks where we don't know the facts, we tend to assign motive without actually knowing factually what the motive is.

So I'm reading this book, I'm reading about mastering your stories, and I'm laughing out loud because earlier that week, I had a situation exactly like that happen.

You see, at the time I was dating a guy who worked at the Situation Room at the White House. They had these 12 hour shifts that alternated between days and nights and three days on, three days off and days and or a weekdays and weekends. But essentially, there would be days that would go by where we wouldn't see each other at all. And sometimes we would just miss each other in crossing, right? So he would sometimes work the 6 a.m. to 6 p.m., but sometimes it worked 6 p.m. to 6 a.m.

So we were in one of those times where he was working nights. We hadn't seen each other in a while and I was at work in my office. It was daytime, right? So I was at work and I was working on K Street, so like two blocks from the White House.

But I was working there and it was snowing. And so most businesses downtown closed. And so while we were still open, we were a store. We weren't closing. We were still open. It did mean that we didn't have any customers, right? All of our customers were gone.

So I thought, you know what? Instead of working long hours tonight, this is a great opportunity. I can leave work early and maybe he and I can, like, meet up on our way and share a meal together, whatever meal, mid-day meal you might call that, or late-afternoon meal.

So I called him & scheduled. We're going to meet at a restaurant. I'm on my way home. He's on his way into work. We're going to meet have a meal.

So I get in my car, I drive through the snow and get to Alexandria, Virginia, go to the restaurant, I grab a table, and I sit.

Then I sit some more. And I'm waiting. And waiting some more.

And as I sat there waiting, my storytelling mind was full on, I was like, oh my goodness, he is so disrespectful.

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I mean, I'm the one that had to drive through D.C. traffic in the snow.

He lives like three minutes from here. And he's not even here.

You know, I bet he's probably sitting around playing video games, just didn't want to end until he got to the next level.

And of course, I would add the intent, right? Oh, I don't even care that much. I mean, like, if he really cared about me, he wouldn't leave me sitting here waiting by myself. This is all the drama, right?

Cue the drama.

Now, I'm not telling anybody. This is just going through my head, but I got all the crazy stories going on in my head.

So what happened when he did come in and he sat down, hmm, passive aggressiveness, man. I gave him the cold shoulder, I gave him those one-word answers. It was really just unpleasant.

So here we were. This is the chance to see him and spend a little time together because we hadn't been so long. And now I'm like not even having a good time. And he's like, I'm really being a jerk, right? So one-word answers, you know, rolling my eyes, snubbing all that kind of stuff.

He says, "Hey, Jamie, you know what? I'm so sorry I'm running late." Since he was working nights, he slept all day with those, you know, those dark, like, blackout curtains that you put on the windows when you're trying to block out the light.

"So we had those blackout curtains on the windows like I was sleeping all day. I didn't realize it snowed as much as it did. So when I went downstairs and to shovel out my car"

(because, of course, he drove this little, you know, sporty little thing, right?)

"I was shoveling out my car. But in the process, my suit just got soaking wet and there's no way I can go into work disheveled like that. So then I had to go upstairs and change into a new suit. And I know that put me behind. I'm sorry I'm late."

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[00:08:25] Guess what? My story was wrong. He wasn't playing video games. He wasn't lollygagging around. He wasn't being disrespectful. Him being late didn't have anything to do with his intentions or his feelings for me.

So really, the jerk at the restaurant was me, right? Now, that incident happened just two or three days before I was reading crucial confrontations, and so it was glaring me in the face like, oh my goodness as well.

I was laughing. I'm like, "Oh, my gosh, that's what I did. That's exactly what I did." And it serves as a great reminder for me even today.

So let's go back to Arnaut's comment in Episode 39. What he was saying is that the process of telling ourselves stories kind of causes us to have a feeling or emotion, which then prompts us to act.

Right? That's all happening within us and within other people. And the stories we tell ourselves are made up of the different context pieces.

So in my situation, it was, yes, my relationship with him and how he's interacted with me before, but also how my past boyfriends interacted with me that had nothing to do with the current guy, right? I bring in their drama on them, but I am. And then I've also got all that messy stuff about my own belief systems, whether I'm worthy or not, like it's all there.

And it's all there at work, too, there's all of this context and all of that context really serves as different colored lenses that we will see the same circumstances through.

So here's the point, Lean and Continuous improvement do not operate in a vacuum.

Remember that while work is made up of process, organizations are made up of people.

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So we can't just develop our management team to learn the tactical side of Lean tools. We have to build their people leadership capabilities too. I mean, what's the point of doing daily meetings and Gemba walks and improvement events if we aren't also developing good relationships with people, if we aren't communicating well, if we aren't being purposeful and effective in how we tell, how we ask and how we listen. If we don't get better at how we give feedback, how we have difficult conversations and how we engage in productive conflict, we've got to do all that stuff.

So organizations are made up of people, and that means weird, messy, complicated, emotional people. We cannot separate the emotional human being from the problem solving or process of work.

So here's the thing, we're just getting started with this idea of internal stories and feelings.

Next week I'm going to take this idea that started when I read crucial confrontations and build on it because I was introduced to models and teachers that helped me understand it on an even deeper level.

So mark your calendar, follow or subscribe to the podcast. If you aren't on my email list yet, go to processplusresults.com and sign up. That way you won't miss next week's episode.

[00:11:45] In the meantime, here is your next step.

I want you to pay attention to your stories.

Where do you get yourself all riled up? Were you filling in the blanks and making assumptions? Were you assigning intent when the true intent is not actually known?

Awareness is the first step. So spend this week on a scavenger hunt, little internal scavenger hunt here for the stories that you are telling yourself.

Until next time.