

The Truth about Leading Through COVID Burnout with Kelli Ogunsanya | 066

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.

Covid burnout is real. I hear it from my manufacturing clients, from my service operations clients, from my government agency clients. I hear it from everyone, so ignoring burnout isn't really an option. So what do you do?

Welcome back to the Q4 Executive Series. Now today, Kelli Ogunsanya, the CEO at STRIDE Community Health Center, is going to share what she's seen with team member burnout in health care, and her goal is to really focus on the human dynamic and meeting people where they are. But you're also going to hear about responsibility. Kelli has operational and fiscal responsibility. So this isn't just an exercise in caring about people. It's an exercise in caring about people while leading organizational performance.

Now in this episode, Kelli also shares a phrase that I have become obsessed with since hearing it. So keep listening and remember that you can find links to Kelli STRIDE and everything mentioned at our website at our show notes processplusresults.com/podcast/066.

Now for an introduction, STRIDE Community Health Center is a 501c3 federally qualified health center that provides primary care and other health related services in a community based setting. It was established in response to the primary health care needs of the medically indigent population in suburban Denver, and STRIDE has approximately 15 clinics and serves more than 55000 patients annually.

Now, as CEO of STRIDE, Kelli oversees a staff of 300 team members spanning business and clinical operations facilities, dental, and pharmacy services. Prior to STRIDE, Kelli served in roles at Optum, at BWC, at the advisory board, and has studied and worked in South Africa, Liberia, and Ethiopia. And she also coaches high performing women to help them feel as good on the inside as they present on the outside look. Bottom line, Kelli's amazing. All right, let's jump in.

Jamie: [00:02:48] Kelli, welcome to the show today.

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Kelli: [00:02:50] Thank you, Jamie. So excited to be here. Thanks for having me.

Jamie: [00:02:54] Yeah, I'm excited to dig in to our conversation, but before we do that, let's get to know you and your organization a little bit. So I want to start off just kind of talking about you. And what would you say is a value, a mantra, a principle, a quote, something that really kind of embodies your beliefs about leadership?

Kelli: [00:03:17] Really great question. You know, for me, leadership is much more, especially post-COVID-19, about the human dynamic. And for me, it is not a title, it's not a position. It is not the number of people that you have reporting to you. It's truly about how can you influence and provide a sustainable impact on those that you work with and that you have the ability to serve.

Jamie: [00:03:44] Oh, I love it. We get to dive into that a little bit today.

Kelli: [00:03:49] Absolutely. Ready for it.

Jamie: [00:03:51] Yeah. And then well, tell us a little bit about your organization. You know who does your organization serve? How do you create value? Tell us a little bit about where you work.

Kelli: [00:04:00] Sure, I'm Chief Operating Officer at STRIDE Community Health Center, and STRIDE is a Denver area based federally qualified health center. We provide community health care services to the medically underserved. We've been around for 30 plus years and primarily focused in primary care, behavioral health, dental services, pharmacy services. We have over 15 plus active clinics across the Greater Denver area and employ a little bit over five hundred patient, excuse me employees and more than 50 thousand patients that we serve on an annual basis.

Jamie: [00:04:37] Wow. Such important work. And I imagine it's been a crazy year and a half or so at this point. Two years, yeah,

Kelli: [00:04:44] It has been. And I just joined in March of this year, so I'm coming kind of at the tail end of the height of the pandemic, but served in a health care capacity prior to then. But community health has

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been at the heart of fighting COVID 19, especially with those populations that we need to provide equitable services to in terms of vaccines and otherwise. And so we have an incredibly resilient organization that has done some great work in the area.

Jamie: [00:05:14] Fantastic. All right, and then the other question I wanted to ask as we get started here is what would you say is the role improvement thinking plays in your organizational strategy?

Kelli: [00:05:28] I think it's at the core. And for health care, which is a such a dynamic industry, improvement thinking systems thinking. I think the buzzword 15-20 years ago was process improvement over and over. Is that the core and we are bound in terms of serving the patients that we need to serve the regulatory landscape. All of the things that require us to be at our best. And I think COVID and where we are right now, which we'll talk about really has forced us to have a different level of improvement thinking so that we can continue to provide safe, quality and accessible health care.

Jamie: [00:06:09] Yeah. So important that we, you know, it's like sometimes I get to an organization and it's this bolt on that they're training you on top of things, you know, it's like, Well, let's see if we can just make it part of who we are and how we're operating.

Kelli: [00:06:23] No, it is. It's critical. I mean, when you think about having to improve processes and functions that sometimes seem to be a day to day rote function. But when you are serving in the health care industry, patients who now have an incredible choice around where they can get health care and employees of where they can work, we have to continue to make sure that we're improving not only for safe care, but also to make sure that we are a destination of choice for employees and patients.

Jamie: [00:06:54] Oh, destination of choice, we might have to talk about that a little. Oh all right. Well, let's talk a little bit about this environment because it is crazy. Our operations leaders are kind of facing these challenges. We have economic impacts to your point that, you know, how do you be an employer of choice because we are seeing some big movements and where people are choosing to work and why they're choosing to work there? Because our kind of employment markets are disrupted.

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And then plus, you know, you've got health care challenges there for you. And then, you know, every industry kind of has their own little pieces. So all of this stuff is going on. So when you think about this current state and you know, this immediate future, what would you say is one of the biggest leadership challenges that you're facing as an organization?

Kelli: [00:07:45] Well, I think right now we're in such a unique position because COVID 19 was an incredible disruptor to the industry for so many reasons, as we all know. On the other hand, it was an accelerator and forced us to move things along that probably would have taken two or three years had the pandemic not presented itself.

And so I think where many organizations, but especially where we are at STRIDE, is trying to figure out how do we continue to respond to the ever changing needs of the pandemic, but also keep our eye back on the core mission of our business and continue to do so in a way where the folks that who are at the heart of our business, our employees never had a moment to stop during the pandemic.

And so what we now are facing is that in order for us to achieve those strategic goals and move forward, we really have to turn inward and focus on our most valuable resources, which is our staff.

Jamie: [00:08:47] Mm hmm. I feel like even where, you know, as we went through, the vaccinations kind of became accessible and there was a period of time where we almost thought there might be a little bit of breathing room, just a little bit. And then everything that I'm reading now is is like, we're way back. Our health care providers are just slammed in there. I mean, it's you're right, they haven't had a break.

Kelli: [00:09:15] They haven't had a break. And I think what we forget about is the human dynamic of, yeah, there's vaccine has come, which is fantastic. But then there's now boosters and there's now new populations. And so it is one thing after another.

You have health care professionals who are working and living in places where there's starch resistance against vaccination and protective measures. And so it's kind of feeling like it's a slap in the face to continue going forward when you're facing that, that resistance in your communities.

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The other piece around that is we have to remember that these are people who have families and significant others who may have lost jobs, who are looking at changing careers, who kids who their kids may or may not be in school right now. And so their ability to show up in the same way that they could two years ago is very different.

And so it's forcing us as employers to really think about how do we meet our staff, where they are to make it a destination of place for work, but also to maintain the same level of productivity and budget and revenue responsibilities that we have to. Our broader community and board.

Jamie: [00:10:30] Yeah. What a massive challenge that we have here. And so when you're thinking about, you know, pouring into these people and, you know, kind of as they're as they're through this year and a half plus into this and you think about pouring into them, what are some things and meeting them where they are, I think I you say. What are some things that you found that have helped you do that right?

Kelli: [00:10:57] I think what communication is the biggest piece right now? We are in a place where as a culture, as a society, we have this lingering anxiety around what's happening, what is my job going to look like? What is the patient population that I'm going to serve look like? How are we going to move forward with our strategic plans?

And I think at a macro level as an organization, we have kind of this anxiety at the person and staff level. There's this some level of anticipatory grief, right, where you're not sure are things going to change? Are they going to go back? Did you enjoy working at home when we had to pause for a little bit? And now what does that look like in terms of your new role?

And so staff are walking into the door with all of these questions and concerns, and we have to really have honest conversations around the fact that we have to keep our eye on the mission of the organization, but also do that in a balance that reflects their realities. And so for me, it is living between this paradox of holding high expectations and accountability, but also recognizing that the pacing at which we could have done that two years ago is very different.

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It's about continuing to chart the vision, but also recognizing that you are going to have to be a little bit more flexible in terms of how you thought your outcomes are going to be generated. And so that's what we do best in operations, though, right? We live in areas of ambiguity. And so now I think that's just become a guiding principle, at least from my leadership style of its that being patient, but then being, you know, a Ford driver and knowing when to flex and pause based on external and internal factors.

Jamie: [00:12:45] Yeah. Would you say there are any cues that you've learned to really pay attention to to help you figure out when to pause or to flex?

Kelli: [00:12:54] Well, I think, you know, when you are trying to set deadlines or targets or goals for your organization and your team, and you're seeing that things are not happening in the same way or as quickly as they used to. When you see that individual staff members maybe aren't showing up in the same way that they used to, I think that is a cue that we have to pause and peel into that human dynamic and really say, How can I support you? What's going on? What's looking different for you here at home and being willing to have those conversations with the staff.

I think it is, you know, just being able to pick up on that emotional intelligence with your CO-leadership team, our meetings becoming a little bit more stressful. Are people showing up late because they're balancing home and everything else. That's a different level of leadership that I think we've not always had to flex in a consistent way. And I think we're going to be here for a period of time. Mm-hmm.

Jamie: [00:13:53] Yeah. Ok. So we've got definitely, you know, this kind of communication being a key to help with a lot of that uncertainty and the maybe some of that anxiety and then the ability to to maybe be more flexible and more patient as you're continuing down your strategic path and and but but recognizing there are these other variables.

So those are some steps that you've taken. What would you say is like, Hey, you know, this is still something that I'm working on with this. We're still kind of working through this part of the challenge and maybe haven't quite figured it out or it's still on the agenda.

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Kelli: [00:14:31] Well, I think one of the things that we're doing right now that is different from how I've ever strategically planned is we are going for our strategic planning process right now. But we're taking an approach that rather than thinking about it from outcomes that we want to drive X percent in revenue or productivity.

We are really surfacing those ideas from a holistic perspective, from our patients, from community partners, from our lower levels of staff. And I think that's important because when we talk about leadership and doing something different, leadership teams are also burned out. And so we have to think about how we source innovation and source ideas from a different level, but also test those ideas on a go forward basis.

So the traditional approach would be to create your operations and strategy plan. Kind of. Here's the strategy. Here's the plan now let's implement and then let's monitor, right? And so what we are doing are small testing periods to say this is an idea of how we grow our capital footprint, how we look at exploring and expanding the types of medical services that we offer and using a really interesting model of feedback and doing small iterations of testing that is not uncommon in terms of waterfall or other processes, but it's now becoming the driving organizational strategy. And I think that will serve us really well in this period of uncertainty when we can't rest our entire strategy on just one angle.

Jamie: [00:15:58] Mm hmm. Yeah. What do you think is going to be the biggest impact of doing kind of this different approach?

Kelli: [00:16:05] I think it is the capacity building that we're going to create in our staff. And so oftentimes that strategic planning value generation thought process is often done at a senior or managerial level and above. I think now having and building that capacity across all levels of the organization. No. One, it's important but 2. It's the buy in.

I mean, the devil is in the details when it comes to implementation. And so if you're thinking about executing a strategy and you have the folks that have to do it on a day and day basis baked into the creation process, that's the game changer for sustainability. And so I think that's something that I look forward to seeing.

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Jamie: [00:16:43] And what would you say is the reason why we think about this challenge here where you've got, hey, we've got people that are that are really struggling. We've got this human dynamic that's so important we still have to balance, you know, strategy and organizational responsibilities while also meeting our people where we are. Why is it so important that you tackle this head on?

Kelli: [00:17:08] Well, I think it's not the first time we will see it right. I think it's the first time collectively as all industries that we've seen it because of the pandemic. But I think if we don't address it head on now, it is very easy to continue to say well, because of COVID, because of COVID. Because of this, we're doing something and we have to be able to say we recognize the external factors, but we also recognize that we have a mission to our staff. We have fiduciary responsibility, fiduciary responsibilities that we have to meet. And now is the time for us to align and really make sure that we can create a process of internal resiliency so that those external factors don't hit us as hard. Mm hmm.

Jamie: [00:17:53] Yeah. And then I also I love this, and I also wanted to just kind of follow up on, you know, being kind of that employer of choice place where people do want to work. What are you learning about as you're, you know, as you're exploring that as an organization, what are you learning about, you know, what's going on in the market?

Kelli: [00:18:12] The market is changing every day, and so, you know, a real situation that we're having right now is that we are having challenges in retention and recruitment and specifically at what I consider our care team staff level. So specifically in health care, our medical assistance, dental assistance, those individuals that are responsible for direct patient care in support of and in conjunction with our providers and care teams.

Those were the positions that never stopped working during the pandemic, along with physicians and everyone else. Those are also the positions that are often underpaid and are difficult to retain on a long term basis because those individuals want upward mobility, as we all do. And so what we're seeing is that what used to be just increased compensation or change our wage strategy is no longer the carrot that's going to attract this type of our of our workforce.

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And so it's forcing us to really think about what do we do in terms of building career ladders, creating internal pipelines of staff growth and development, thinking about what really incentivizes staff members to work in an environment like a community health center and playing into some of those intrinsic factors, rather than just compensation and great benefits.

And so that's really testing us because every organization is going through that right now. And so it's kind of an arms race of who can get there fastest. But I think it's exciting. And I think in the long term, that's what makes employees loyal to you and want to stay for the long haul.

Jamie: [00:19:57] I think it's so great, you know, as I hear you kind of talking about, how are you going to look at this and what are you going to do? I recently was talking with a couple of leaders, senior leaders at some organizations, and they were almost coming from this idea that they could ride it out. Like, almost like, you know, this was a dip, but that it would come back in some way. Yeah. And I'm just not so sure that's the case.

Kelli: [00:20:24] I'm not, either. I think there are some things that certainly we can actively watch and monitor. But I think what is different about the period that we're in right now is that we are not seeing that dip and people had an opportunity to pause, especially if they needed to work from home or change their work schedules. And I think they realize the value of mental wellness.

They realize the value of being with their families and that they want careers and employers that are going to continue to invest and support in their growth and riding it out. I think it's going to result in some folks getting left behind.

Jamie: [00:21:05] Yeah. And I think it's also so interesting when you think about it. I also see that that flexibility that people want and then when you are talking about folks that are in frontline roles that cannot work from home. So in direct patient care and things like that is like, we, you know, there's still some level of flexibility in ways that we can help people find that, yeah. It just looks really different than work from home.

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Kelli: [00:21:30] Yes. And I think that's where we're trying to find the sweet spot. So I can remember the date to a team March 16th of 2020, when the health care industry really flipped the switch on telehealth, right? And so for so long, you know, folks had telehealth platforms, but maybe it was use 20-30 percent of the time and that became a game changer in accelerating digital support and hybrid work.

And so now it's how do we look at those models of where we were pushed to think about how can we support staff members that are frontline facing and otherwise so that they can still have continuity in their work environment, but also feel psychologically and safe and protected from a wellness perspective.

Jamie: [00:22:18] Yes, I love it. I love it. So let me ask you if your best friend or you know somebody you cared about for an operations executive, you know, facing these same challenges. What do you think you would say to them?

Kelli: [00:22:35] I would say that, you know, it feels a little bit like a tornado right now and that everything is spinning, spinning, spinning externally, and I think this is the time that we have to go back to the drawing board and focus on what makes our internal organization strong, unique and where do we need to start investing?

And I'm adamant that it's with our people. I think that this is. I do appreciate the concept of riding it out, but I think that while this is a long game, we cannot bury our heads in the sand. And that being intentional with around how we pivot through this process will serve us all in the long term. So it's focus internally, but also maintain and pace yourself because this is not going away as quickly as I think we thought it would.

Jamie: [00:23:24] Yes. Fantastic. All right. So we have a lot of listeners who are operations managers, variety of industries, right? So thinking in whatever capacity, whatever industry, but they're in there in the operations management roles. For those folks, how do you think they need to evolve? You know, thinking about this, you know, people leadership aside, how do they need to evolve to be able to navigate those challenges of today?

You've got call outs or you've got whatever the challenges are today, be able to still kind of deliver results and achieve his organizational goals, but also create those cultures where people thrive and they do want

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to come in because so much of this, so much of the a workplace somebody wants to to work at is, you know, is based off that local leader, the person they're interacting with day in and day out. So what do you think those operations leaders need to be doing?

Kelli: [00:24:18] Yeah, you're exactly right. I mean, I think what makes people stay and what makes people leave from an organization often is that direct manager, right? And so I think from an operations leadership perspective, we are conditioned to want to focus on reducing variability, focus on processes, manage to that run chart, look at all of the the KPIs. And part of that framework of leadership has to be the human dynamic.

And so where our operations leaders are going to really thrive as number one, they can be involved in helping create that HR strategy and growth model, but then also getting some really specific training in coaching around what does it mean to lead and in a time of dynamic flux?

And that's hard for us because we want to control all the variability. We want to make sure that our processes are not out of range and we are living out of range one hundred and fifty percent. And so it is how do we create that consistent leadership style where this is our new normal? And I think that requires a heavy degree of flexibility. It requires a heavy degree of understanding. What are long term outcomes, but recognizing that we have to pace ourselves and create consistent communication to our teams to drive it.

Jamie: [00:25:41] Yes. Oh my goodness. So good. So Kelli, here as we wrap up, this has been such a great conversation as we wrap up. Any closing thoughts, words of encouragement, words of wisdom that you would want to leave our listeners with?

Kelli: [00:25:55] Yeah, I would just say, as I mentioned earlier, you know, I think as stressful and emotionally taxing as it can be right now to be an operations leader, it's an incredibly exciting time and we need to not forget to celebrate a lot of the small and large wins that we've let our teams through over the past two and a half years.

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And that maintaining that focus on what the pandemic, what other external aspects forced us to do means that our teams can change. We're resilient. We can pivot on a dime. And so how do we take the quickness and the ability to change to what the pandemic forced us into? And hardwire that into our long term strategy. So I just say kudos to all of them. It's a long game and I'm rooting for everyone.

Jamie: [00:26:43] Oh, I love it. Thank you so much. This has just been so much goodness, all wrapped up in a short little time block.

Kelli: [00:26:51] Thank you. Thank you. I really appreciate it.

Jamie: [00:26:57] Now, Kelli lives in Denver, and I am so glad that we have been able to meet. We actually share a mutual acquaintance, which is kind of how I was able to find her and get connected with her. And as we talked, we also have some shared locations and kind of passed in our past with like Atlanta and D.C. and just different things that we've done. So very, very cool. And I don't know. I'm like fangirling over here because I think Kelli's awesome, don't you?

Look, we're going to put links to her LinkedIn profile and to her organization, to STRIDE and to her coaching for high performance women. We're going to put all those links in our show notes so you can grab those at [processplusresults/podcast](https://www.processplusresults.com/podcast).

But I have a question for you. What do you think is the phrase Kelli shared that I've become obsessed with? Yep. A destination of choice. And Kelli talked about that both for patients and for employees. And so when I think about the labor market or really markets in general, choice is at the center right. People have more choice now and they're more aware of the choices they have, and they have access to more information with which to make that choice. So how does your organization become a destination of choice? That is a good one.

Jamie: [00:28:21] Hit the white boards, get out the Post-it Notes, get out the markers. Now, that wasn't the only great takeaway, right? You heard Kelli's passion about the human dynamic at work and meeting people where they are. She talked about the balance of achieving organizational objectives and

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recognizing that you might need to do it differently or being able to see the signs that you might have to take a look at the pace at which you're moving.

And here was one, it was a small little comment, but a big thing that I want the executives and senior leaders listening to really here. All right. Burnout isn't limited to frontline team members. Leaders are experiencing it, too. So think about how you lead your leaders. Think about what that interaction is like. All right.

Your turn, your next step. What is one thing that you're taking with you from this conversation that you want to write down and hold on to and revisit later and make sure that it doesn't slip through the cracks? What is it? Write it down and share it. Share it with a colleague, share it with a friend. Share it with a team. You can also share it with us on LinkedIn. You can tag me at Jamie V. Parker and you can tag Kelli Ogunsanya. Remember we'll put those links in our show notes.

All right. Next up, in our executive series, David Pender from Sage Glass joins us to talk about retention and people first culture. Then we're going to take a break from this series for Thanksgiving, so the podcast is going on, but you're going to get me solo. After Thanksgiving. We're going to come back. And on December 1st, Jasmine Gorey from Sunland Logistics Solutions really gives us an HR perspective on attracting and retaining great people in a dynamic market. Then we'll wrap up on December 8th with Chris Chippendale from ET Credit Union, and Chris talks about developing a leadership bench during a time of need.

You know, like now, like in this employment market that we have right now, where most organizations are struggling to fill positions. How do you actually build a leadership bench? And of course, if you missed it last episode, Dave Connor from Anker Industries talked about the role of a leader in the three layers of leadership that he thinks are critical and he thinks all three work together. All right. Well, tune in next time as we talk with David Pinder. See you then.

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