

Better Retention with a People First Culture | 067

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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Jamie: [00:00:29] There's been a lot of talk about the hiring challenges in the current employment market. How do we fill open positions? But what about retention? How do you keep current team members and how do you keep them engaged? And when you do hire, how can you hire folks who are more likely to be engaged enduring contributors?

Well, keep listening, because David Pender is today's guest in our Q4 Executive Series, and he and his team make some really cool products. It's electrochromic glass, which tints automatically in response to the sun. Can we just say smart glass? I'm going to say smart glass with a smart glass, right? So here you have the smart glass, these windows that are made of smart glass.

These are beautiful buildings and it stops my scroll. Like when I'm scrolling on LinkedIn, I'm like, Whoa, what's that? And then I start reading and then I hear David talk about what the smart glass does and why it matters and the value that it creates, and it's very cool. In fact, I'm going to see if I can get any pictures that I can put at our show notes so you can see what I'm talking about. All right, enough of my fan talk.

Jamie: [00:01:31] Let's go to introductions. So David Pinder has designed and run some of the most advanced manufacturing facilities in the world. He has started them up, debugged them and brought them to full capacity. And David brings his unique background of high tech knowledge, mixed with Lean methodology and pragmatic leadership to ensure the technical success of these high tech startup facilities.

Currently, as Vice President of Operations at Sage Glass, David manages the world's most innovative and high-tech electrochromic smart glass facility. Now, Sage Glass is the global leader in this smart glass

Better Retention with a People First Culture | 067

systems. They have more than a thousand projects in dozens of countries, and this smart glass tents automatically, like I said, so it tends automatically in response to the sun or upon demand, which delivers comfort, well-being and energy savings to building occupants.

And I'll say Sage glass is part of the same Gabon family, and so they are backed by a global leader in building products. Now remember that you can find links to connect with David. Learn more about these organizations at our show notes, processplusresults.com/podcast. All right, let's dive in.

Jamie: [00:02:50] David, welcome to the show today.

David: [00:02:53] Thank you, Jamie.

Jamie: [00:02:54] All right, so let's kick off. I want to learn a little bit about kind of you and your approach. So what is a value, mantra, principle, something that embodies your beliefs about leadership.

David: [00:03:09] Ok. Sure. I'd look at it from a couple of different perspectives, one of which we always start with safety at Sage. Safety is extremely important to us and we have a mantra around safety that's a little bit of a mouthful that we haven't portrayed throughout the plants, up on the walls and large, large lettering. And it's "Nothing is so important that I cannot take the time to do it safely."

So the onus is really on the individual. But we're very, very proud of our safety culture here. Safety results, of course, but also the way that we've incorporated that safety culture throughout all every facet of Sage. And so that's very important. We start every day with a safety message and this mantra, which we break down sometimes just to nothing so important to it's incorporated into everything that we do. So that's safety, and I think it's very important at the very daily level to be always thinking about it.

When we go in a slightly different direction, we've got a Sage vision and the first line of the Sage vision is that people come first. And by that, we're talking about our people. We're not talking about the customers, but we've used this. People come first. Also, as a mantra, particularly over the last 18 months, as we've navigated through the pandemic and we've over communicated all of the things that we're we've been doing and use, the people come first.

Better Retention with a People First Culture | 067

As with, we're very proud we've had no layoffs over this period of time, whereas competitors certainly have and we've put our people first and we've put them ahead of the customers so that we, for example, stopped the plant for two weeks, even though we were considered an essential business and took the time with everybody who's hourly on the floor fully paid. But we took the time to get ready for the pandemic. And then since that time, we haven't stopped. So that's another mantra that drives me and my team every day.

And then when we look at even a higher level, we're a part of a much larger organization. We're part of St Gobain, which is the largest building materials manufacturer and supplier in the world. And the Singapore has defined their purpose and the purpose of saying above is the mantra making the world a better home. And we at Sage, we actually think that we embody. We epitomize that purpose and and feel that it's very relevant here as well. So that sort of three different levels where we use those on our regular basis, particularly as we over communicate to our team.

Jamie: [00:05:56] Yeah, I love that. You know, it is so true that often we hear how the customer comes first, like we hear it all the time, right? People say it all the time. Customer comes first, customer comes first in. This idea that our people come first can really help you in making those decisions when you're, you know, you're faced with a tough decision.

David: [00:06:14] Well, I think Richard Branson sort of took that concept of putting your people first and then they'll take care of the customer. So I'm not saying it's my idea. That's all that.

Jamie: [00:06:28] Well, I love that you embody it.

David: [00:06:30] Yes, absolutely.

Jamie: [00:06:32] All right. Well, tell us a little bit. I know you started talking a little bit about the purpose, but tell us a little bit about your organization. Who do you serve? How do you create value?

David: [00:06:40] Sure. So I work for Sage Glass. Sage Glass makes electronically tinted all windows. That's the product and the electronic controls that go with them. So think of it as as tinted windows for commercial buildings. Essentially, that's what we build and and sell. But what we see ourselves providing

Better Retention with a People First Culture | 067

is much more than that. We provide comfort and access to the outdoors for building occupants. So, you know, access to the outdoors, the ability to see the ability to get natural light in reducing glare, increasing solar control leads to happier people leads to more comfortable folks in buildings. That leads to the ability to charge higher rents. It leads to the ability to say we are more productive when we're in school or we're healing faster when we're in a medical facility. So that's the real value add that the the product brings. So that's what we that's what we do.

Jamie: [00:07:59] Yeah. You know, David, I don't remember exactly how our paths crossed and how we got connected, but now that we're connected, I see all these posts on LinkedIn and I always I just like I always stop the scroll when I see these pictures and videos of, you know, buildings with your product.

David: [00:08:18] Well, the connection to the outdoors, I think it's. It's something that's very important and well-being and well, buildings are becoming huge, and we do sort of epitomize that that connection that people want to say, hey, to my employer, I want to have a view. I don't want to sit in this cubicle.

You can have open space all you want, but make sure I've got that connection. Architects want as much glass as possible, but you've got to think about the end user and that's usually the person sitting inside and they don't want to be bathed in in direct sun all the time. So we walk the talk and our folks here love it as well. So I personally couldn't imagine going back to blinds and shades. That's B.S..

Jamie: [00:09:11] Yeah, for sure. All right. Well, let's jump in and, you know, thinking about the last few years, what what's been maybe one of the biggest leadership challenges that you've faced as an organization? And how have you either tackled or maybe continue to tackle that challenge? Walk us, walk us through a little bit of that.

David: [00:09:35] All right. Well, it's been a very challenging few years, obviously, but that's the same for everyone out there. So I'm not going to talk right now about the pandemic. I don't think that that we had at any different to anyone else, although we did have the driving mantras that I spoke about of putting the people first. And we're very proud of how we've performed in a very stressful situation.

But at the same time, we're taking here a concept, a technology that that 15 years ago was on the pixel size. Where you've got switchable glass and taking that to a high volume manufacturing.

Better Retention with a People First Culture | 067

We actually call our facility HBM high volume manufacturing because it's the first of its kind in the world and it's the only one the only facility that produces this glass within Singapore. So we are producing here for worldwide customers. Forty percent goes throughout the US, 40 percent goes to Europe, which is where St Cobain is, is headquartered. And and we're producing for the rest of the world as well.

So we've just produced or we are finishing up producing Glass for a Google headquarters in in Bangalore, in India, and that's 200,000 square feet. So that's the biggest job we've ever done in the biggest job that anybody's ever done. So it's a huge building with electrochromic glass throughout. So the challenges here are taking a high technology from a concept to a business with massive growth year over year growth in terms of volumes of 40 to 50 percent over the last year.

We've had a little plateau, but that's mostly because of the way the world has reacted. Mm-hmm. But that growth is extremely challenging, both because it's an extremely high tech product and we need it to be stable over all of those shifts, but also because the teams are growing so rapidly and with rapidly growing teams, you've got to make sure that the culture that we're trying to embody is understood by everybody is.

You know, at all levels of management throughout the organization really followed, and that these coaches are incredibly important. So those are many. I mean, we're all facing challenges also along with everybody else. Hiring is difficult, but when you're really growing like this, going from one shift to two shifts to three to four shifts, recently, we've gone to 24/7 in parts of the plant. And that's continual change management that we're going through. Hiring is very necessary.

But we've also been proud of our organic growth as well because it gives a lot of folks the ability to grow. And so training has been essential. From the high tech, as we take this, you can't learn how to make electrochromic glass anywhere, you know, whether it's at a tech school or anywhere else. So we have a very in-depth training program and we've been using this all the way along. So it takes quite a commitment in terms of we are going to train the people properly.

But when you do that, that also leads to better retention. So yes, it's difficult to hire if you focus on training and retention as we are doing. We think that can continue to be successful if you provide what we think is a great place to work. Yeah. So those those are some of the things.

Better Retention with a People First Culture | 067

There's lots of parts of retention that we look at. I'd say one of the most favorable ones is we give a bonus to people who recommend people we should hire who they recommend. We call it the bridge builder program because the Saint-Gobain logo is a bridge and it builds the bridge to the future for us.

But we've got many people who recommend other family members, and a father is not going to recommend his daughter if he doesn't think she's going to really live up to those expectations. That's what we've found anyway. So the recommendations from folks who work for us, they're not going to recommend a job to a family member if they don't think it's a great place to work safely. It's a nice environment.

So that's one aspect. But also we see retention is higher with these folks because we know they're sort of already vetted and that's been very important. We couple that with the training that we do, and we see that the focus is on retention.

Jamie: [00:14:51] Yeah, you know, that's so interesting. Like when I just heard you say that like, you know, a father recommending his daughter, right? When you think about it and there's both from both directions, but we talk about creating an environment where people want to work and how that impacts it. But I feel like there's something about that father daughter, just those words when you said that, I feel like it just took it to a whole new level, like, are you creating a workplace where you're, you know, the fathers that are on your team would recommend would want their daughter to work here?

David: [00:15:24] Absolutely. We've got a number of families here. I mean, the factory has been running for, let's say, eight years now, but we've got a number of families here who when you add up the service of the team members in the family, they're at over 30 years. So that's a father, his two sons. And then there's actually there's two families where one of the sons and one of the daughters are married, and they both work for us as well.

So two supervisors have their kids working here and our supervisors would not recommend their family members because they know what we expect if it wasn't, you know, a fact that they knew their kids were going to take it seriously and understand the expectations, particularly in terms of safety, right? Never

Better Retention with a People First Culture | 067

cutting corners. And that's where we've got to be. Know the values of safety when they're. You know, pushed down through the family, that's very powerful.

Jamie: [00:16:30] Yeah. Okay, so you've had this tremendous growth in this high tech like, hey, you've got to have this training and it sounds like so this retention and training have been things that have been really helpful and worked well for you. Anything that you feel like, hey, here are some gaps or challenges that we're still trying to figure out when it comes to having this culture throughout growth, right? Keeping this culture when we're growing our teams and expanding our operations and all of that.

David: [00:17:03] Well, there's there's always a couple of back steps, and I remember listening to one of your previous podcasts where you spoke about, it's not the case that the best operator should be, then the team leader and the best team leader becomes the area supervisor.

It oftentimes doesn't work out that way. So it's finding those who want to step into the multitude of leadership positions that we have here and working that sometimes it doesn't work out. And there's the ability also to pull back. You know, people can say, yes, I want to be a team leader and then they realize, Oh my Lord, that's that's extremely challenging.

I'd rather go back to being a technical expert. So we've had a couple of folks who go up the ladder and then took a step back. So that's worked as well. It's understanding what's the motivation behind each individual, particularly what's your motivation to be a team leader? And we've instigated a new mentorship program, particularly for new team leaders, because they're stepping into a new role. And we can talk about things like safety and things like quality a lot. But then if you're going to run into situations as a new team lead where you've got to make a call, and that mentorship program gives them the ability where they can bounce things off.

Somebody who's perhaps got nothing to do with operations. You know, a couple of these team leads have had our CEO as their mentor, a couple of head to the VP of Sales North America as their mentor. And I think that's important because they see a different leadership style. It's not just, Oh, what would Greg do or what would David do or whatever they get to bounce things off and grow that way as well?

Better Retention with a People First Culture | 067

Jamie: [00:19:03] This mentorship program sounds pretty interesting is, you know, as I'm hearing you talk about it, anything you would add about, like whether it's either why you're doing it or how you were able to bring it to life, because I know that sometimes it's like the bandwidth or the structure. You know, people, we feel like there's these obstacles in our way. Like, Oh, meaning that maybe you learned through this process that you could share for someone who is interested in having a mentorship program for their leaders?

David: [00:19:31] Well, I think that many companies do it for high potential people at a certain technical level who they think are going to go on to lead other parts of the business. We've brought it all the way down to our front line shop floor leaders who for me, they're the ones who at 3am on a Sunday morning are representing the cultures, the values and the culture of the company. And they have to make that decision when nobody else is around and they're the boss.

So that's why we brought it all the way down to them because we also found in many cases, we were looking to promote very young individuals who'd been with us for maybe only two years into that position of responsibility, and they'd never done anything like that before. And so we created the program very Sage specific and took aspects of this. There's a Saint-Gobain mentorship program for very high level folks that took aspects of that and tried to define what this mentorship relationship should be all about.

And it wasn't all that easy because we were taking somebody who's very young, pairing them with somebody who's really quite experienced and and saying, Okay, this is a mentorship. You know, you close the door, you can talk about whatever you'd like to learn about, but they're not going to solve your problem for you. This is about you learning to be a leader. So do with it what you will.

And that freedom didn't always work, and you have to sometimes bring it back and say. Ok, we'll structure it a little bit more, why don't you think think about a conflict situation and just discuss it because the freedom of what should I what do I want to learn about leadership with sometimes a little too much? Mm hmm. But oftentimes it's formed this very interesting and and strong bond between front line guys and gals and people they often wouldn't interact with very much.

Better Retention with a People First Culture | 067

Jamie: [00:21:48] Yeah, yeah. I love that idea of, Hey, there's we want to give space to people to learn what you want, what you need, but maybe some framework. So here are some particular areas that we, you know, you'll need to dig into.

David: [00:22:01] So we had to to bring it back sometimes a little bit and make it not as broad so that you learn things that they that they need to learn, right?

Jamie: [00:22:12] Yeah. What is it that people need for sure? Well, let's talk about the future, right? So like and when I say future, I mean, from today on. Right. So the here and now and then looking forward into the future. Anything that you like when you think about either the leadership opportunities you expect manufacturing organizations to face or how you think operations managers might need to evolve to be able to navigate these challenges, what comes up for you?

David: [00:22:43] What we have seen over the past year and moving forward, as as workforces evolve this concept of trust, empowerment and collaboration, those three things pulled together are really critical for newer workforces that are trying to be dynamic and grow, you know, empowering folks to really look at their own retention within their groups. I think it's very, very important.

Jamie: [00:23:20] So let's talk about this then, you know, trust, empowerment and collaboration. What makes those so important?

David: [00:23:30] Well, I think traditionally it's been much more top down management, right, and and I know you've talked about that as well. In fact, I think you've called yourself a reform something.

Jamie: [00:23:42] Yeah, I call myself a recovering command and control manager.

David: [00:23:46] That's right. And to some degree, so am I. I would say. And so empowering teams. But then over communicating to them what the goals are and what the expectations are, but saying you can take this and come back to me with your ideas is huge, right? So trusting them, allowing them to to make decisions and collaborating across departments.

Better Retention with a People First Culture | 067

This isn't just operations. Operations is pretty. It's not just production and maintenance and engineering, but involving the quality department in that collaboration, pulling in the R&D folks when needed rather than, you know, really having us then sort of mentality. So that's been a big. Big evolution, I would say.

Jamie: [00:24:46] And if you're thinking about it for the operations leaders on your team or maybe operations leaders that might be listening in order to do that in order to create trust, empowerment, collaboration. Any, you know, like any thoughts about what you know as a leader, as an individual leader, what I need to either do not do is pay attention to.

David: [00:25:08] Well, active listening is incredibly important, right? So not going in with your preconceived. You've probably got the preconceived ideas, right, I think this is how I'd solve that problem, but standing back and allowing them to say, Well, this is the way I want to solve it. Asking questions, making sure that they've thought it all through.

But I've been surprised a couple of times recently where I would have done something completely different. And you know, how we've responded to working from home is one example where I would have said, this is the way I want to do it. But we actually pulled a collaborative team together, from the logistics manager to, you know, an executive assistant.

The head of marketing all came together with an a young R&D person from R&D, and they came up with ideas of how we'd speak to the organization and ask the right questions around flexible working hours and working from home and things like that. That was that was interesting to me. I wouldn't have done it that way traditionally, but I've learned from it, that's for sure. And I think it's much better as a result of the US trusting that team and them collaborating together.

Jamie: [00:26:32] Yeah, great. Anything that you think we should be talking about that we haven't yet.

David: [00:26:39] Well, certainly sustainability is huge, right? And I think we're incorporating the concepts of of carbon usage, carbon footprint, how much of our water we're recycling, how much energy we're reducing year over year. We're in a LEED gold certified manufacturing building. There's only two of them in the United States, but so it's already a very sustainable building. But the the whole company, you know,

Better Retention with a People First Culture | 067

it's an enormous company that makes glass and plasterboard and a whole bunch of things worldwide which use an awful lot of energy.

We've said we want to become carbon neutral by 2050. Lots of companies are doing that, of course, but we've got this plan in place now where every single capital project where we're pricing carbon in, we're looking at our carbon footprint and we're trying to become more sustainable all the way along. I think that's very important from a company point and a business point as well.

Jamie: [00:27:47] All right. So, David, as we wrap up today, what words of encouragement or advice would you leave our listeners with?

David: [00:27:57] Well, I'd say that. You know, operational management is really people management. It's you're dealing with people all of the time, you're dealing with equipment and machines and processes, for sure, but you're dealing with people. But when we've found when we focus on people and growing their leadership abilities, I've certainly been surprised by who's really willing to step up for one.

Sometimes it's not the person that you're expecting to step up or traditionally anyway. And the more open minded I've been, the more success I've also seen in growing talent throughout our organization. So focusing on people and focusing on on their growth, that's what I've been focused on.

Jamie: [00:28:51] Oh, I love it. Focusing on people and their growth. Wonderful. David, thank you so much for joining us today. Really great to hear about the good things you're doing.

David: [00:29:03] Well, thanks, Jamie. It's been a pleasure to be on.

Jamie: [00:29:09] No, I'm not very sciencey or very techie, but this stuff is cool, right? Yeah, I think so, too. So what stood out to you? Think about the things that David shared today. So he talked about safety and people first as a culture. And he talked about how people first translates into retention.

Remember the referral program he talked about and fathers recommending daughters or the mentorship program that's expanded beyond just the executives? It's not just the executives that are able to get mentors and giving them space to learn, but also some frameworks to provide that structure.

Better Retention with a People First Culture | 067

And he also talked about trust, empowerment and collaboration as the core to success in the future, and that we do that by focusing on people and their growth. Now those were some of my takeaways. Maybe you had a different one. What is it for you? What's that? One thing you want to write down. You want to hold on to it. You want to revisit and make sure it doesn't slip through the cracks.

Figure out what that one thing is, and then I want you to go one step further and share it. Don't just hoard it, right? We're not hoarders here. Share it. You can share it with a colleague, with a leader, with your team, with a friend. You can always hop onto LinkedIn and share it with me as well, so you can tag me Jamie V. Parker and you can also tag David Pender. We will put his links and all of that in our show notes.

Jamie: [00:30:36] Now we're going to pause this executive series for two weeks, so for the next two weeks, you get me solo and then we'll be back. So on December 1st, Jasmine Gorrie from Sunland Logistics Solutions is going to give us an HR perspective on attracting and retaining people in this dynamic market.

And then we're going to wrap up with the Q4 series on December 8th with Chris Chippendale from Credit Union, and Chris is going to talk about taking this time where people or organizations are struggling to fill positions and actually talk about the component of How do you build leaders? How do you develop enough leaders when you don't have enough people? So tune in for that one.

Now, of course, if you miss the earlier Q 4 executive series, you can head back and listen to Dave Conner, kind of talk about the roles of a leader and the three layers of leadership he thinks are critical. And Kelli Ogunsanya talked about leadership through COVID like through the COVID burnout, something that she is very close to in the health care industry.

So we've got some great guests and great conversations, some great topics, and I hope you're tuning in to all five of these episodes of the Q4 executive series. All right, you get me solo next week and I will see you then. Until next time.

Better Retention with a People First Culture | 067