

Perspectives from the ILC: Tackling Staffing & Sustaining Challenges | 069

We are celebrating Thanksgiving this week, and one of the things I am grateful for is the community of Operations Leaders and Lean Practitioners who give and share and support each other. My journey would not be possible without other folks pouring into me. And in that spirit, we're bringing you a special episode today.

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.

Hello, hello, Jamie V. Parker here. I am in Des Moines, Iowa, at the Iowa Lean Consortium, the ILC Annual Conference. Super excited to be here. I have been partnering with the Iowa Lean Consortium for I want to say like, you know, for years it's been a while and just really love this community. It's such a great group.

Tracey Schuster does a fantastic job with the Iowa Lean Consortium. The conference volunteers who helped put this thing together do a fantastic job and just a great opportunity for leaders and improvement practitioners to come together to learn, to have great dialog, to challenge each other and just a great event.

And I will tell you we are in Des Moines right now. There is also a satellite location that is participating and there are a bunch of people virtual. So this is really a hybrid event. It's been fantastic to see what that experience is like being in that virtual setting and just seeing all of the work. I mean, just tons of people behind the scenes to support a virtual or a hybrid scenario like this.

So here's what we're doing today is I'm super excited to be here at the ILC conference talking with people. So here are, you know, some Lean Practitioners, some leaders, people who are out in the field doing this work day in and day out. And there are a couple of topics that were really common.

Jamie: [00:02:12] They're heavy on people's minds. And so we pulled folks in said, Hey, let's talk about this. What do you think? And so you're going to get to hear some kind of real time responses and

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perspectives from folks that are out doing the work. And I hope my hope, my highest intention is that this can be an opportunity to spark conversation, right?

And so we're not like coming at it from like, Oh, hey, here, listen to all of these experts, give you the answers where Typekit is like, Hey, here are different people with different perspectives who can help spark dialog within your group. So listen to it and think about, all right, if I have my team, listen to this as a starter, and then we have our own dialog to come up with our own perspectives and share our own perspectives, how might that help you?

First up, let's talk about sustaining, because sustaining is a challenge, it's something that I hear a lot in conversations and dialogs. How do we sustain? And you know, what are the practices that have been successful in sustaining? Maybe it's improvement gains that have been made so that they don't slip back or sustaining improvement, thinking over time or sustaining that improvement culture. So let's tune in and hear from Jennifer and Stephanie and Tommy on their perspectives.

Jennifer: [00:03:34] I'm Jennifer Peterson, and I'm a Continuous Improvement Lead at a Municipal Utility. So over the years, we've tried a lot of things to sustain improvement practices. What's been impactful the last few years has been a strong vocal and active focus on continuous improvement. One of our leaders has actually started a group that meets every month where they report on problems or projects that they solved. The team then votes and there's a trophy that's handed out every month.

It's not a big thing, but everyone knows about it and it's a lot of fun. We have lunch we share and the guys get their pictures on posters and so everybody knows about it. And it's really helped for that leader to build this culture into his group. And he figures that if nobody else wants to improve that, he's going to improve his group. So that's what we've done.

Stephanie: [00:04:31] Hi, I'm Stephanie Hill, the owner of Light Bulb Moment Consulting out of Des Moines, Iowa. Unfortunately, I don't have a one size fits all when it comes to sustainment. Like many things, it relates to the culture, complexity and resources. First, when we talk about culture, when a change takes place, the method to sustain it must be in alignment with the team's culture. Part of that is adapting to the location of staff.

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These days, you may want to consider ways to shift in person monitoring discussions to virtual options. If an improvement involves significant behavior changes, the facilitator needs to get comfortable frequently talking about how people feel about those changes. In addition to checking status of improvements or reviewing metrics, you may want to ask questions like 'Is this improvement making the impact you expected or is there anything about this?' This isn't going the way you thought. So if you stay in touch with how people are feeling about change, you can avoid situations that might sabotage the improvement for complexity. The complexity of the improvement impacts the method and timing versus statement.

So some improvements are fully implemented in a week, and they simply rely on regular reviews of control charts or control plans and other improvements may take months to implement. So it's important to keep the teams engaged and on track while also thinking about the other priorities that they've got going on in their lives. For resources when in person, using printed out graphs or sticky notes on Kanban boards works really well and it's very inexpensive, but we're increasingly virtual, so you may want to look at tools like mural mirror and idea boards, and those can be just as effective.

Now, in my past, I was always setting up a series of follow up meetings and managing the documentation and communication from each of those discussions. Well, that quickly became overwhelming the more and more improvements that we were doing. So it's really important to leverage other resources, both the human and technology. So I had started developing CIA ambassadors, and I leaned on them to help ensure that improvements were being sustained.

I also want to give a shout out to one of our fellow exhibitors here at the ILC conference connects us. This is a wonderful, customer centric company that developed software specifically for the CI community. When I began using Connexes, I noticed that my own time freed up immensely. I had a quick view of data.

I could see action items, participation in action, which is important to see as well and progress toward our goals. It also offered a repository of documentation, which is also important to see for our improvement efforts. So overall, I would say sustainment is a key part of any CI cycle. We just want to be sure to

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consider the people element, not just the tasks and metrics if you want to have a long lasting Lean program.

Tommy: [00:07:20] So this is Tommy CHANCE from Dan Foss in Ames, and I'm a Continuous Improvement expert. You know, you've got to be personal with everybody you're working with. And so sometimes that's really difficult to do with the busyness that we have. But but it's very important to engage everybody.

And so I think the the basic level of problem solving and root cause problem solving is the front line people. And so we can't get so caught up and kaisins and projects and other things that we forget the people at the front line.

And so that's my first caution is is to make sure we're continuously keeping the operators and the machinist involved in that root cause problem solving that that root cause, problem solving should be giving us a steady amount of improvement just out of what we're doing. Even the smallest piece is very good. So but it's tough to get the support staff into the caissons now, and we do have some big projects that are going on.

So, so sustaining what we need to do during the events that we're doing is to plan for sustainment to begin. So a lot of times people forget on the end of the five S's, even as there's there's sustainment and I would say even standardize is looked away. So most places are doing pretty good threes, but not too many as buddy's doing five as the other.

The other thing I would say is we need to get to increase our competency in an Lean. And so we one of the first things that's fallen off in the last few years, I think, is the amount of training that we do there, not only with just our leaders, but across the shop floor.

And again, we get into these these pandemics, we get into these other material flow and supply chain issues. And the first thing we forget about is that front line people are leaders getting the training they need. And so. And so if I can, if I could walk back to my workplace and we can set up a solid training system again, that would probably be the biggest thing we could do to move us ahead.

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Jamie: [00:10:13] Now, sustaining is not the only challenge that folks are facing, especially right now. In fact, right now, staffing is a challenge. This is probably the most talked about topic or challenge or problem that I am hearing in the circles that I travel in because most organizations have multiple position vacancies that they haven't been able to fill.

And the question that everybody's asking are how do we, as leaders or as improvement practitioners, kind of keep improvement at the forefront where it's helping people or it's making stuff better while balancing the overload or the burden of work from being short staffed? Right. So how do we make sure that improvement isn't this thing that's burdening folks, and it's also not something that just gets put on the shelf. So how do we do that? What do we do? How do we balance that? Let's tune in to hear from Mackenzie and from Jessi on this topic.

MacKenzie: [00:11:08] Hi, my name is Mackenzie Rayleen and I am the Training Bureau Chief at Iowa Workforce Development. You know, we were an organization that was hit really hard by the pandemic, not in terms of employees, you know, finding other things, you know, being out of the workplace, but helping all those folks that were. And so our workload increased dramatically, I would say. You know, and then we're also struggling with the shortages that everybody else is.

So for us, it was a really good time and it still is a good time to look at all of our processes, see if they're efficient. You know, we need to do more with less like everybody else. But I think one thing that I really tried to do and I have been trying to push out as best as I can in my role is really appreciating the folks that we do have because they're there, right? And we want them to be happy and show up every day. A

nd if they're happy, they're doing the best work that they can. And so it's important really to engage with them in a way that is positive, that makes them want to keep coming and not join the percentage that as part of that great resignation right now and include them.

MacKenzie: [00:12:20] So, you know, their workloads have increased. So use them to also get ideas of how to make things more efficient. Really, they're doing the work, and I think they appreciate, you know, being asked those kind of questions and being involved in those decisions rather than a trickle down like

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this is what we're going to do to get the job done like, you're in it. What are you seeing? Tell me how we can best support you to help you get the job done.

So I think that's been really effective for me. And as our and for our organization just to keep up and keep doing the best that we can, but not getting stuck in that, you know, this is the way that we've always done it. There's so much work. We can't make any change. There's never really a good time for change. And so when things are mixed up like that, it's the perfect time to really focus on improvement and Lean processes and all of that great stuff.

Jesse: [00:13:20] My name is Jessie D. Priest. I'm a Director of Operational Excellence at First National Bank of Omaha and an independent Lean Coach. I grew up on a dairy farm in Alaska, and then I served in the army after college. And when the mission got critical, when the job had to be done because my big brothers were away playing basketball or something happened in the mission, I didn't have enough people. The leaders rolled up their sleeves and they went and did the work. We went and swung a pail, if you know what I mean, to help get the job done.

So when we're in chaos mode where we don't have enough resources and some things have to give, I would say, first of all, leaders pick up a pail, grab a broom and go out and do work with your people. Not only will we help build relationships and be better for it, but we're actually going to help accomplish the mission.

Second thing I would say is in these difficult times with scarce labor, while we're also trying to make improvement as leaders have to make tough choices. And if we aren't prioritizing the improvement work and we still expect brilliant results from the people that have to do the work, that's not fair.

So leaders, our job is to make good decisions and be clear and get aligned about those decisions so people can focus and not be overburdened.

Jamie: [00:14:42] To add in to this conversation, I'm bringing back this little clip with Gary Peterson back from our September executive series. And Gary and I were talking about what happened at OC Tanner, right? Ok.

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Tanner is this organization that has been practicing improvement, thinking for decades. So what happened at OC Tanner when the pandemic hit, when there was crisis, when there was uncertainty, when folks were buckling down to figure out how to get production out the door and pay attention to how Gary Course corrected?

Because what I think you're going to hear is you're going to hear the parallels in the challenges we're facing now when times are tough, when we feel too busy or too short staffed. So listen up to hear this great advice from Gary.

Gary: [00:15:22] Well, the biggest struggle, I thought, was that everyone just kind of hunkered down and was focusing on producing, and they were they kind of stepped away from all the principles and systems that have always brought us success. And it was almost like, ok, the world's in turmoil. There's pandemonium. Let's just produce.

And so things were stopping like my continuous improvement like team huddles, like problem solving and and they just assumed that we were just going to hunker down. And I and think about that. I mean, that was maybe a month into it. If we'd gone 18 months of no improvements, of no team meetings and no problem solving and no strategy deployment. That's a horrifying thought. And we actually nip that in the bud very early.

We said, Look, guys, when things get rough, you fall back on what matters to you. You fall back on your principles or systems. You double down. You enrich them. You do them even better than you're doing them. And as for as far as we've come in the 30 years that we've been on our continuous improvement journey, I never would have believed that I had to emphasize that as strong as I did. That was a shocker to me. And but but a good learning, a really good learning. And I think I think we're stronger because we adapted and found our way back to what matters.

Jamie: [00:16:58] All right, that wraps up our episode for today, a big thank you to Jennifer, Stephanie, Tommy, Mackenzie and Jesse for their contributions for heading on over to my little booth at the ILC and, you know, kind of recording impromptu some thoughts that they have to a couple of challenges that I've

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been hearing a lot about. Hope you have a fabulous Thanksgiving week and that your heart is full of gratitude. Until next time.