

Can a Kaizen Event Help You Achieve Long-Term Improvements with Adam Lawrence | 073

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.

Think about a time when you and the team work together to solve a problem or to improve a process, and the new way of working was better. Yay. But some time passed and then the new way kind of disappeared.

We went back to maybe the way things were before. The improvement wasn't sustained. Been there before. I know I have.

Well, we're joined today by Adam Lawrence of Process Improvement Partners and having facilitated more than 300 improvement events in different industries across the world, Adam has learned a little bit about what it takes to sustain Improvement Event Gains, and he's going to share some of what he's learned with us here today. Let's dive in.

Jamie: [00:01:19] Adam, welcome to the show today.

Adam: [00:01:22] Well, thank you so much for having me, Jamie. It's a pleasure to be here.

Jamie: [00:01:26] Well, I am excited to talk about the wheel of sustainability, but before we do that, let's just get to know you just a little bit. You know, tell us briefly what types of roles or improvement practice you've been a part of.

Adam: [00:01:39] Ok, well, sure. So thanks for asking that question. So originally started out as an Industrial Engineer out of Virginia Tech, joined a company many moons ago. Did engineering and process improvement work throughout my many decades career, all around the world. I had some operations leadership as well as engineering, quality control.

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And then my last six years with the company, I was the global Lean champion for a technology division of the Ceiling Tile Company. And then the last three and a half years I went out on my own as a Continuous Improvement Consultant with a company I named Process Improvement Partners.

Jamie: [00:02:22] All right. Well, fantastic. So you've been doing this little improvement thinking for a little while.

Adam: [00:02:26] For a little while? Yes. And long while.

Jamie: [00:02:31] Ok, so you've been doing this improvement, thinking for for a long while, a little while, and you recently kind of wrote a book and establish, I guess, a framework even before that called the Wheel of Sustainability. And so I wanted to just start with, you know, kind of where that came from. Like, what problems were you seeing that, you know, that kind of led you down that path of creating this?

Adam: [00:02:56] So, like we said, been doing this a long while, so probably just over 30 years of Continuous Improvement work as I knew it to be, that probably five more years of it, not knowing I was doing that. So I used to get sent in to help teams solve complex problems, typically on factory floors.

And what was going on was during a very intense week of effort, we were solving some really meaningful problems to the team. But what I found out was after I would go back to my corporate location, the problems would resurface and that really bothered me.

So. I loved the joy of the people solving the problems, but I knew how frustrating it could be if we didn't have a system to kind of lock those solutions in for good. So I would say over the last decade or so, I started to build this framework, you know, understanding the mistakes that we had made along the way and the way I was working with the leadership teams, the operations teams, et cetera, to kind of support the work.

And I would say over the last 10 to 15 years, I developed this framework that I now call the Wheel of Sustainability just to have an easier image to grasp.

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Jamie: [00:04:10] Yeah, you had to come up with a name and a picture, right? Absolutely. Right. I'm with you.

Adam: [00:04:16] Yeah, it's so true.

Jamie: [00:04:17] Okay, so so then let's talk about it. We are not going to go into every single detail, of course. But I think the problem is you talked about it is something that everyone is probably shaking their heads at right now, right?

It's like we've all been there. We've all seen that happen. And so, you know, through your learning over that last, you know, 10, 15 years, you learn and you found, I think it's eight different things that kind of make up what is needed for sustainability.

So we have, and I hope, tell me if I get these, if I mess them up, so it's notification, training and review, visible evidence, all tools are available, Clear benefits, Layered audits, accountability, and recognition.

Adam: [00:05:04] That's right, and so I'm from Amish country, I'm not from Amish country, but I live there, so think about a wagon wheel, so you've got eight out of actually nine elements. So the central hub of that wagon wheel is the leadership commitment.

So all of the spokes tie into that leadership commitment and the wheel helps create that image of all these things, how they come together and how critical they are. But you are right. You've got them all, you've got them all. And we all do work on our leadership approach and commitment.

The difference I think that I have is that I'm able to portray that image. What does it really look like to have the commitment to implement the wheel in such a way that the teams get a win that sustains?

Jamie: [00:05:47] Mm hmm. Ok. All right, cool. Got it. So we've got these eight spokes all kind of coming in to that central ninth element of leadership commitment. Perfect. And so. So let's just take pick one, right? So and I'll let you pick it. So let's pick something that because I want to, you know, while we don't

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have, I'm sure we would need a full like webinar length time frame to go through all of them. And of course, folks can grab your book and read more about it as well.

But I do want to say like, Well, how does this show up? Right? So if we were to look at one of those either the spokes or the central, if we were to look at one of those elements, what's something that you see that is often missing or it's done in effectively and it kind of starts to make this this wheel not quite roll the way we want to do right.

Adam: [00:06:35] Right, right. So great question. So a couple of things to think about. First of all, if a spoke was removed, the wheel would still work. It would just be weaker. If the hub of leadership commitments remove, the thing falls apart. But there are so many discussions on leadership. I'm not going to go there at the moment.

So think about this, Clear Benefits. It's the fifth if you're going clockwise. You know, traditionally we'll find our way at clear benefits. So what this is trying to say is the team has come up with this idea for something new, something better, something safe or something more productive.

The idea, though, is would it be seen as a benefit to the person that it's going to be given to or expected to use it? So what I say to a lot of folks, this is the part of the Kaizen event. I tend to work in Kaizen events, improvement events, very short duration where we focus teams to try to solve a complex problem.

So early in those sessions, the teams have come up with something they want to do and they kind of get married to it. So then we get a reality check. I'll have to give them a reality check. So I send every team member separately out to speak to somebody who's not on the team and find out what their feedback would be. And as you might imagine, the initial feedback is never positive because people tend to think, expect the worst and hope for the best. Right.

There's little psychology in all of this. So the idea is to surface those issues and start to realize that, you know, when we're not there at 2:00 a.m. on evening shift, somebody's going to make a choice. They're going to make a choice to do or do it their way or do it the new and hopefully safer, better way, right?

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But if they don't see it as a clear benefit, they're unlikely to do it. So in the old days, we call it what's in it for me with them, right? I like clear benefit because I like to think about why are we doing it and how does it help? It helps a pretty critical word. Mm hmm.

So oftentimes we send the teams out. It's very early in the session and they're having these discussions. Sometimes they can get very challenging, but they also surface things that maybe we missed. So I've told people this story.

One time somebody came back with kind of a look of embarrassment on her face and she said, Oh my goodness, I didn't realize every team members right handed because we forgot that we have left handed people in our factory. And because she had that tough discussion after the initial, you know, anger for You're changing my world, the person kind of said, Now I understand why you're doing it. But did you realize that we have left handed people?

Oh, my goodness. So this is this is a great opportunity, and it also kind of grows that buy in and commitment from more than the team. Now you have some allies, now people know that their voices are being heard. So what we're trying to do is get the entire organization to be part of the team, even if they don't know that they are.

Jamie: [00:09:23] Mm hmm. I loved I do love this idea of saying, Hey, you know, so so here's what I see a lot in Kaizen events or improvement events is that we go to the same people over and over. Right? And so it's like, Oh, it's the same people over and over. And then, you know, so this idea of saying, hey, which we could probably change that practice, too, but regardless of who's in this room? Go out and have real conversations with other folks because you can get I have seen like what's happening in this group almost kind of starts to lose touch a little bit.

Adam: [00:09:57] Right. Yeah, absolutely, they get married to their idea, so I always say it's not it's not a good Kaizen event if you don't upset somebody. Right? Because really, you're challenging the way everything goes. So they are going to have a challenging conversation. So I have had I have gone out on the floor to get in the middle of some of these conversations because sometimes people don't take things so well.

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You're not listening to me. Why would you do this to us? What were you thinking? And they don't even have the opportunity. They don't even clear their mind to even hear or listen to what the team was thinking. So the term why? Why are we doing this? Why has to be part of this conversation? But you might imagine that if teams aren't used to being in Kaizen events? The way they describe what they're thinking doesn't always come out, very polished, right?

But you know what, that's great because now they see the real world reaction. Yes, it makes us stronger. It makes the solution so much. How are we going to explain? So when you go back to the earlier elements, notification training and review, et cetera? Now you go, Oh, now I see what I need to talk about because otherwise I'm going to get yelled at and they're not even going to listen to me.

Jamie: [00:11:08] Yes. Well, and I think the other thing that's training as I'm hearing you talk about this is that clear benefits is not the thing that you do at the end to try and manipulate. So and I think this is where I've never appreciated the term, you know, the whiffoms. Right?

And it sounds like, you know, hey, you've got some better language, too. But but because of that, because it does, I do think that I would so often hear it as kind of an authoritative way to try and manipulate people to do what we want them to do. Let me go and try and figure out how can I spin this from their perspective so that it's for them, even though really it's what I want to do as the boss, right?

And so that's where I think, you know, we're kind of my aversion to that comes from. And so this is a very different approach. This is not after the decisions are all made. Then try and figure out how you're going to sell it to somebody. This is saying, Hey, let's look at clear benefits as part of the process of learning and making sure we come up with something that's better that we don't get, you know, kind of stuck in our ways.

Adam: [00:12:12] Yeah, you make a great point that I want to reinforce that I didn't really bring out earlier when I run Kaizen events, we do the whole wheel within that Kaizen week. So we are actually going to implement every single element. Prior to or during. Mm hmm.

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Ok. So the team has to understand what that is and what it looks like, you know, as well as they're going to, especially if some of them have never been introduced to it before. Right? Sure, because I tend to work with companies that are very early in their journey, it just kind of works out that way. People know that I'll try anything right.

So we'll do it again, going out on the floor, going out in the office and describing what you're going to do early before you even have a final solution because there's no final solution in case and you just run out of time, right? So go out early. My team members hate this step. Do we have to? Heck, yeah, you do. Let's go. Have fun, you know?

And so if they're from now, the other piece is how we build the team. The team has to represent the people that are going to be impacted by the change. Right. So if I've got four crew right on a twenty four seven type operation, I'm going to have at least one team member from each crew.

Ok, so they got to do their best to represent the interests of their coworkers. Guess what, if they don't guess who's going to hear about it? So there's always that personalization. There's an accountability to piece of this, but they don't always realize what that means.

So you've got to have a great team. You've got to seed them well, feed them well to. It's that's very important. They've got to want to win. They got to care about the people they work with so that that shines through, by the way, it becomes very obvious early on if you really have the right team.

Yeah, because if if they're not in it to win it, it's going to be tough. It's going to be tough. So we try to prep. This is where the leadership commitment comes in. Build the right team, give them everything they need to win when they get in those difficult conversations during clear benefits. How do leaders support those conversations?

Hey, you might not agree with it, but let's at least listen to what they have to say. So supervisors get involved. Plant managers get involved, operations managers get involved. Yeah, so this is that's where that leadership commitment comes in. They have to know we're going to make a change and it may not really be very nice early on because those initial responses are not going to be positive.

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Jamie: [00:14:33] Mm hmm. Ok. The other thing I want to just bring us to as well is, you know, so why you why you came up with this framework, right? And it was, of course, through all this practice, but it was because what would happen is the improvement has been made and measured time passes.

Things start to wane and then we're like, Oh, we need to go sustain this. And you know, unfortunately, it's like, it's like, I think it's a little late in the game to start talking about that. So so thinking of that. But that's the normal. That's a normal experience. Again, every leader knows every leader's had it right, every leader's experience that before.

So when if a leader is going through and saying, Hey, we're doing a problem-solving event, we're doing an improvement event and I want I don't want that to. I don't want sustainability to to to be a problem later on. What are some of the things from the very beginning, maybe even before the event happens or in that first kickoff? What are some of those things that they should be doing or thinking about then, so that sustainability becomes more, I guess, like, achievable?

Adam: [00:15:37] Well, clearly, they should be reading my book beforehand. But but honestly, what I do typically in my process is I always do a site visit and we're talking about before we even agree to anything we want to see what is the problem we're trying to solve.

And then I go through a chartering process with sponsor leader basically to talk through truly the problem, why it matters, what's the impact on the people? What's the impact on the customer? What's the impact on the business? So we go through the chartering process in such a way that it becomes, do we really have a compelling case for change? Why does this matter? Why would it matter to the people? So we're trying to set them up for a win now we're going to build the team that can help solve it. And then I'm going to design the session that's going to implement the wheel now during my visit with leadership, this is usually four to six weeks before any event unless they've worked with me enough that they kind of know the drill right.

We're going to talk about how the wheel is going to fit in so I can provide an image of every spoke as it will apply to the problem that they're trying to solve and how the team will engage with it during the event.

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I can't tell them what the solution will be. I've learned many years ago not to predict the solution because the team always does beyond what I expect, which is great.

All I do is I keep pushing them to see how much more we can get done and accomplished. But what I can do is show leadership, what all those all those elements will look like in their office, distribution center, factory, whatever have you, and how they'll have to engage with the teams to ensure that each piece before, during and after the event will be implemented and sustainable? Hmm. Ok. So there's a lot of planning that goes on in all of this. You just don't throw a Kaizen event at a problem. That's a bad idea.

Jamie: [00:17:26] Yeah. So what would you say to somebody who says, like, Hey, you know what, we're like? We appreciate all this, but we don't need all this formality. We just need to get it done.

Adam: [00:17:35] What I've said to people is let's at least let's at least consider these elements. Right? So I've told teams you don't have to be an expert in it, but we're going to take. We're going to test all of these elements and see if we have them because testing them is better than not testing them, right? At least you considered it. So I just want to get stuff done. Hey, there's corporate policies. There's I can weld things in place. I can tell people to do stuff.

What I would say is this is just something that I've learned that's made things a better opportunity to sustain. And my evidence of that is that I get pictures. People send me photos of things two to three years after they've done the event, showing me how much better it looks like. They're bragging. Love that because what it says is it was that important to them. It was that meaningful and it did help. So the word is help, right? It's a great Four-Letter word. Do we care enough about what our people are doing that we're willing to help them win? Right? So if I just want to get stuff done and I'm not considering my people, I just don't seem to care enough to help them win, right? I want to get stuff done too. But if at least I'm thinking in that framework, I've got a better chance of it sustaining.

Jamie: [00:18:48] Yeah, fantastic. What's one of your favorite stories versus sustainability for sustaining improvements like? Was one of your favorite stories that you can share with us.

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Adam: [00:19:00] I have a million of them, so. All right. So I'll just I mean, I've done so many stories. So there's actually 36 of these stories in my book because I love watching people win. Ok, so here's here's one. Here's one. So we're doing a changeover project. This was about 20, 15 years ago, OK? And we were changing over paint booths, right? One color to the next now. This was in the land of ceiling tiles, so a color is a different shade of white.

Let's be honest, most offices OK. So we always take a Gemba walk. At that time, I didn't know I was taking the Gemba walk. We took a process, right and the team was made up of mostly line operators in a few mechanics in this factory in Oregon. And we saw all sorts of great stuff and we're taking our tour of the line and we went all the way to the end of the line and there was a a woman in a booth cutting edges with a utility knife off of a two foot by two foot square tile, and that looked really rough. So it had nothing to do with our changeover, but we were just totally curious about what was she doing.

Adam: [00:20:08] So we talked to her and she we said, Well, how often you have to do this? And she said, Well, I'm supposed to take a test every 10 to 15 minutes. I said, Do you do this all day? Oh yeah, I do it all day. So does your wrist bother you? Oh yeah. So we didn't like that at all, and we found out later on that that was one of the top safety concerns in an ergonomics way at the factory, right?

So about a day and a half into the event, we're really cranking through some wonderful changeover improvements. And in the middle of a team meeting in the room, a mechanic comes up to me and says, Adam, you know, I can't get that utility knife situation out of my head. Can I work on that? Can I work? I've got an idea. Can I work on it? I said, Well, this is a team decision. I'm just your facilitator, you know? I'm just standing here looking pretty. So let's talk to the team and see what they think. And they're like, Yeah, yeah, yeah. In fact, one of the operators said, I'd like to help.

Jamie: [00:21:07] Mm hmm.

Adam: [00:21:07] He said, Well, I've got an idea to take about an hour, hour and a quarter for maintenance, so you've got to multiply by four, but that's OK. So the team said, yep. And they were cranking through some. We had already cut the changeover time in half or we were on target to easily do that. So they go away for a little while.

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And they come back with this contraption that looks like a big vise with two foot angled iron on both sides of the vise to find Englebach and and the mechanic says, Hey, check this out. So he puts the tile vertically into the vise, tightens it up real quick and taps it and the whole edge cuts off clean. And we're and we're all slack jawed. Well, that's really cool.

So then he turns the towel and the and the operator does it. Same thing happens. We said, All right, well, let's go see. I can't remember what her name. Let's call her Olivia. Let's see what Olivia thinks. The thing was on wheels. So he's thinking very Lean ish and he takes it to her. Olivia and he come out here, Olivia, I wanna show you something. She knows how to put the tile in. He said, Now tap it right here. She taps it and it cuts clean off. And she gave him the first hug he ever got in the factory. I mean, he's like a six foot five person big dude. And she and she's like, Can I keep this? He says, Well, it's a prototype.

Adam: [00:22:24] Well, I'll test it for you. So we gave it to Olivia. Ok, cool. So the rest of the week, we're doing all this great stuff, you know? And at the end, we used to do report outs without PowerPoints. We would just give a give a little talk in the room, talk about the three or four things we did and then give it to her.

Right. So about 20 staff members come out. Plant manager, HR manager, ops manager, supervisors. We said it's a party. Bring everybody out. We got stuff to show you. So we take them around the line and show them all the cool changeover stuff and gave them the before and afters and all that kind of stuff. And you know, there's lots of clapping and they're all surrounding us and the maintenance guy, he said.

Wait, there's one more thing we want to show you. So he brings Olivia out. They put the tile in there, tap it and the thing breaks off. In my life, I've never seen 15 people's jaws drop at the same time, but it happened right then. And the HR manager says we've had engineers working on this ergonomics problem for over six months and you guys solved it in three and a half days, this is awesome. And she gave the mechanic the second hug he ever got in the factory. Hmm. So that's one of my cases.

Jamie: [00:23:38] Yes, it's a good. It's a good one. I can see why.

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Adam: [00:23:41] Yeah. Very cool. Still get goosebumps thinking about it. Yeah, it's really cool.

Jamie: [00:23:45] Very cool. And I think kind of all coming back to how do we help people, right?

Adam: [00:23:50] Absolutely. Yeah, I mean, just gave of himself, right? Because he just didn't see. He did not. He wasn't aware that she was doing this. You know, mechanics say they're solving problems. They're responding, but you know, they don't always get to see what happens minute by minute, hour by hour, day by day. So that was really cool that he just gave of himself, and he just knew this was more important than anything we were doing that week.

Jamie: [00:24:13] Yeah. All right. Well, lovely. Well, then as we as we wrap up our conversation today, you know, thinking about our audience. So our audience is primarily operations executives, managers and supervisors. And so these are folks who are wanting to integrate improvement, thinking and methodology into how they lead their teams and manage their operations.

So for those operating operations folks out there, what words of advice or encouragement would you leave them with?

Adam: [00:24:43] Well, that's great, so I probably spent 20 to 30 years in office, so I can totally relate. Love it. It's exciting stuff. So what makes OP's run is the people, clearly, right? So what are we trying to do? We're trying to help people make things better. So if we give them systems and make the commitment to those systems and listen to them to help them solve, they're they're so creative.

People are so I've seen I've done literally three to four hundred of these things around the world and I've never ceased to. I've never been ceased to amaze. I know that's the right term anymore. It never ceases to amaze me how creative people are when we give them the opportunity to work together to solve a really complex problem, right? So my advice is give them that opportunity and give them your support.

Never ask. Do you really need three days? I can only give you two, don't ask, do you need to be in there 100 percent of the time? Or can you go to three meetings, right? If you're trying to solve a critical problem

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and you want your people to do it? Give them every ounce of support that you can. Don't take it away from them. Give them that opportunity because they will give you the return beyond your wildest dreams.

Jamie: [00:26:02] No, I love it. Fantastic. Well, Adam, thank you so much for joining in our conversations today and sharing. We'll make sure in our show notes that we link to your book and your web page or your LinkedIn and all those things so people can connect and maybe read. Read some more of those stories.

Adam: [00:26:20] Awesome. I appreciate that. Thank you for having me, Jamie. I really enjoyed it.

Jamie: [00:26:27] All right, I hope you enjoyed some of these insights from Adam. And remember that you can find all the links to connect with Adam to follow him on LinkedIn to purchase his book all of that at our show notes. Just go to processplusresults.com/podcast and then you find the episode. This is episode number seventy three.

Now for your next step, so I want you to evaluate how well you and your team currently sustain the improvement gains you achieve. Right. So just think about how well do we do this right now and what are the factors that contribute to the success or the lack of success in that sustainability and improvement sustainability? So just do a little bit of digging. Is this a problem for you now or is this something you've nailed? And if it is a challenge, what do you know about the factors that contribute to it being more successfully sustained or not? All right. I wish you a wonderful holiday season. Until next time.