

Better Succession Planning for Business Continuity with Kerry Siggins | 077

Welcome to Lean Leadership for Ops Managers, the podcast for leaders in Ops Management who want to spark improvement, foster engagement, and boost problem solving - AND still get their day job done. Here's your host, Leadership Trainer, Lean Enthusiast, and Spy Thriller Junkie, Jamie V. Parker.

[00:00:29] I had so much fun talking with today's guest, Kerry Higgins. You know, after the conversation, I was trying to come up with that one core opening sentence, you know, to kind of start this description with. But there was just so much goodness in that episode. It was really kind of hard to do for me to narrow it down.

I mean, we're talking purpose at work and executive team development and manager development and empathy, vulnerability and relationships and the direct team versus the PR team, all kinds of stuff.

So here's my opening sentence. Trust me, this episode is worth 30 minutes of your time. Today's executive series guest is Kerry Sagan's CEO of Stone Age Inc, a global leader in designing and manufacturing high pressure water blasting and sewer cleaning tools and equipment used in industrial cleaning.

Now, Kerry was named CEO in 2009 and has since led the company in building a robust global presence, resulting in double digit growth year after year. And her passion lies in organizational and leadership development, where she helped Stone Age employees grow both personally and professionally. All right, let's dive in.

Jamie: [00:01:37] Kerry, welcome to the show today.

Kerry: [00:01:39] Thanks for having me, I'm glad to be here.

Jamie: [00:01:41] Yeah, so I'm super excited. You live in Durango, Colorado. I'm in Littleton, Colorado. So fun for that little kind of semi local connection there.

Kerry: [00:01:50] I'm glad to be down here. I love coming up to Denver, but I will tell you, I love living in southwest Colorado. It's a great place. It's a great place to be, that's for sure.

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Jamie: [00:01:58] Yes, it is beautiful out there, for sure. Well, listen, as we kick off this discussion, I just want to start off and learn a little bit about you. So, you know, tell me a value, a mantra, a principle, something that kind of embodies what your beliefs about leadership are.

Kerry: [00:02:15] Sure. Well, I would say it's kind of the Stone Age mantra, and that is great people, great product, great service, and that's really what the foundation of the company was built on, and I absolutely believe in it.

Without great people, it's really hard to develop the the products and services that you're that your customers need. And so that's really everything that we try to do is how do we how do we develop our people, grow our people, hire really great people, how do we innovate our products and services? And then how do we go the extra mile on that customer service excellence and really deliver a unique experience to our customers?

Jamie: [00:02:59] Yes, I love it. I am all about developing and growing people. It's totally my interest point in Jim. So excited for that, too. Well, tell us a little bit about Stone Age then you know who does your organization serve and how do you create value?

Kerry: [00:03:12] Stone Age is manufacturing company, and we make squirt guns on steroids, a high pressure water, jetting equipment for industrial cleaning applications. So our products would be found in applications like on that show, like the world's dirtiest jobs. That's where our products are. So it's they're used anywhere. You would use ultra high pressure water to clean so pipes, tanks, surfaces, heat exchangers and refineries, chemical plants, food processing plants. So, you know, the dirtiest industries out there.

But it's really a unique industry. It's a really niche industry, but it's a really important industry because everything that we use comes from some sort of industrial facility that is manufacturing our products. You know, the the can of soda that we're drinking or the tires that we drive on our car, the fuel that we use in our car. And all of that has all of that production equipment has to be cleaned and our equipment is what used to go in and do just that.

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Jamie: [00:04:16] Yeah, fantastic. So many applications for sure. And we all understand how important it is for our machines to stay up and running. And that can't happen if we get all, all that gunk in and gear stop and all the things.

Kerry: [00:04:29] Exactly, exactly.

Jamie: [00:04:30] Perfect. And so I wanted to ask you. So you're the CEO in the CEO role and you know, as you're thinking about kind of moving forward. So thinking about leadership and organizational succession and what happens over the next three to five years and beyond. What would you say is one of those challenges that you really need to start tackling now in order to to make those future years work and make those future years better?

Kerry: [00:04:57] Yeah. So I mean, I think that there's there's two things, there's the people aspect and then there's the, you know, how do we solve problems for our customers aspect? So for us, I'll start with the product, the product aspect, the innovation aspect first. So our our biggest issue, I would say in our industry is not unlike many and that's the labor issue.

There's just not people there to do the work and water blasting, industrial cleaning. It's a very, very dirty, hard, dangerous job. And so attracting people who want to come into that, especially when they can make as much money, you know, working in fast food right now, it's really hard to attract that next generation of workers. And so we really have to be developing products that solve the labor problem.

And then the other major issue that we see on the horizon is, of course, water. We know that water consumption is always, always has been an issue, but it's going to be more and more so as we see water shortages around the world. So how do we develop products that do the jobs faster or use less water so that that cleaning can be done more effectively, but still being still using water rather than other environmentally unfriendly things like chemical cleaning or using abrasives and things like that?

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So we've got some really big technical challenges ahead of us. How do robots do this work and how do robots do this work using less water? So that's kind of the technical aspect of what we have to face from a people standpoint.

Kerry: [00:06:30] It ties together, you know, the the world has changed so much in the last two years. And if there's anything that I feel confident of, that is people are going to have to learn how to adapt and change faster and and and be ready for what's thrown at them.

And so when I look at succession within my company, I'm really trying to figure out like, how do I create little like mini CEOs, right. People who have to be able to know how to be able to handle the complex issues that are thrown at them, whether it's looking at new businesses handling challenges that come with it, with disruption, seeing downturns because of some major global events and maintaining current business supply chain issues, all of these things are so complex, and if you have people who can really address those issues and not just fall to top executive leadership like that is where the goodness is going to come.

And so that's what I want to do is really develop people who are ambidextrous and and be an ambidextrous organization that can really morph and change and grow despite whatever challenges are thrown thrown at us, or maybe because of the challenges that are thrown at us.

Jamie: [00:07:48] Yeah, I think that's so important that ability to, you know, one. We know there are challenges in front of us right now and then we don't know all of the challenges that we're going to face, right? So developing those people who can help us be agile and respond to whatever it is because, you know, there was definitely a time where while some people might have been predicting pandemics, it certainly wasn't on my mind. And then everything that came across, you know, after that and then the supply chain challenges and employment market challenges.

And that's kind of the heart of what we're talking about here, right? Which is we don't need people who can just be good at a certain thing at doing something. We need folks who can be really good at solving problems that identifying them and understanding them, at thinking outside the box, being creative and doing that in a systematic way. So it's repeatable over and over.

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Kerry: [00:08:34] Yeah, definitely. And and I think you really hit on a key point there and that is, you know, being good at one thing. That's what I is going to do. I is really good at doing one thing and that one thing only. And so if you're a person whose role is is very singular, I would say, then there's a good chance that that kind of job is going to be replaced by AI.

And so really, as you're looking to upskill workers and and develop those future employees, it's got to be people who have the ability to have different skills that intersect, that create real value, that solve really tough problems, that can create those systems and then work with AI and with technology that that can do those more mundane or more singular focused jobs really well. And it's a little scary.

I'm not sure how it's exactly going to look, but it's also exciting because like then you're developing people who I think can find real purpose and meaning in their work because they're they're solving challenges. They're working together with people. They're they're they're figuring out unique ways to add value to customers rather than just push a button, push a button, push a button, push a button which you know some people love. But that's not very rewarding for a lot of people.

Jamie: [00:09:59] Yeah, and that's so interesting that you bring that up too because I was just so I was doing some research on purpose at work and kind of that connection for folks, a personal purpose. You know how that gets fulfilled at work. And you know, there have been several studies done kind of since the pandemic started because of, you know, how many people are reevaluating the revaluing their life, they're reevaluating their work.

And Mackenzie did this study about purpose at work, and I don't have the the numbers in front of me. So I'm sure I'm going to misquote the stats, so I'll I'll put them in. The show notes the real stats, but it was, you know, this huge percentage, 80 percent or whatever people say that they want to fulfill their purpose through their work. And so sometimes we think, oh no, that those have to be separate. But, you know, 80 percent or whatever, the number is high number say, no, I can. I want to fulfill my purpose at work.

But then they said that there's actually a purpose gap between, you know, kind of senior leaders who say, yes, I can fulfill my purpose at work. And then frontline team members, frontline supervisors, front, you

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know, first level managers who say, I want to, but I can't. And that is so important that we figure out how to close that because it's not like, oh, only senior executives are worthy of fulfilling their purpose at work, right? We've got to we've got to figure out how we close that gap. And I think that's what you were talking about. Some of that is what you're talking about.

Kerry: [00:11:18] Absolutely. Yeah, I read that same. I read that same study and and that and it really hit home with me. And it's I think that the reason why senior leaders feel more purposeful for work because, you know, they're making the decisions, they understand the vision of the company and where they're going and how the decisions that they're making really, truly impact all of that. And they have typically have more autonomy in their roles and more flexibility in their roles.

And so I think it's I think we can create that for for other people on our teams, for individual contributors and for managers and supervisors. If we're willing to say we're going to be radically transparent, we're going to make sure that everybody understands exactly where we're going as a company and why we're going to make sure that we have people here who believe in the mission and people who don't. That's fine. You don't have to, but you can't work here. And so you can create it, it's it takes it takes work, it takes a new shift in mindset.

But I do think it's incredibly important because if you think about it, we spend so much of our time working. Humans are meant to work. That's what we've done, you know, since existence, our existence and and it doesn't surprise me that 80 percent of the people surveyed want to find purpose in their work. It's what we do and work well-being is the key thing in our overall well-being.

I don't care how good of shape you're in. I don't care how great of a social life you have and how amazing your family is and how connected you are in your community. If you hate your job, it impacts all of those. It diminishes all of those and you can't. It's really hard to hate your job and be effective in all areas of your life. So I think that really finding that I don't know that that secret sauce and helping people understand the vision of the company, how they're tied to it will help them find their purpose in their work.

Jamie: [00:13:17] Yeah, absolutely. All right. So then so you're kind of on this mission to say, OK, how can we really develop people beyond just senior leadership, you know, creating people that can solve

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problems and figure out better ways of doing things and, you know, really contribute on different levels? So tell me what you've learned so far that you've had some success with. Is it what you just talked about with the transparency and some of that? Or what would you say is like, Hey, these are things that we've learned are working well.

Kerry: [00:13:44] Being able to really effectively describe your culture and your culture is simply the way that you do things. And I think that that's really, really an important thing. People need to understand what is the culture here, what are the norms, what are the behaviors, what are the expectations? What does success look like? What does failure look like? And if you can clearly define that it makes a lot of people for easier for people to say, OK, here's how I fit in. So I think that's really key.

The second thing is building teams and teamwork hands down. It has taken me. I coming up on my 15th year of running Stone Age, and it took me about 12 years to figure out like developing my executive management team and really getting clear operating principles, expectations, the way that we work together. There's no silos. There's no this is my resource kind of thing, and I've had to really work hard to clearly define that.

Now the second thing is, how do I take that to what we call our joint management team? Everybody, all of those mid-level managers who all have to work together but don't necessarily have that tight relationship like my executive management team has? How do I help instill that? So they all work really effectively together?

They have the skills to manage well because if they're doing that well, then the people who work for them will have more opportunity to thrive because they are. They've got bosses who care. They've got bosses who communicate effectively, who work together with upper management, with peers, with other departments.

And I think that's really critical. But you can't have that if you don't know what your culture is. If you can't put words to, here's the way we behave. Here are the attributes that successful employees have, and here's how we're going to help you get there. It's really tough to build strong teams if you don't have that.

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Jamie: [00:15:41] Yeah, and I think having that also helps you identify where the difference is between what you think you have and what you actually have. Exactly. You know, so you can at least say, Hey, you know, maybe we're not 100 percent there yet. This is who we aspire to be. And now that we know who we aspire to be and how we aspire to behave, now we can see when we're making decisions out of alignment. Yeah, when we're leading people out of alignment, all of those things

Kerry: [00:16:04] Now, well, you know, it really made us develop. It was that we typically we would let people go, that people would go in the company because they are great teammates. They have some sort of behavior issue that's causing performance issues. You know, now obviously, there's sometimes that there's just a mismatch or somebody just doesn't have the capacity or the capability to do the job.

But almost always, it's because something interpersonally isn't working. But then when you would let a person go and you would talk about these things, you know, someone would say, Well, I didn't know that I was supposed to do that or that that was what was expected here. And that's when it became really clear to me like, Hey, we have got to define this because if you don't, if you don't understand it and have everybody speaking the same language, then it's really hard to hold people accountable to those behaviors and those expectations.

So you can't you can't. I don't know if you don't have a written down and you don't live and breathe it and practice it and show up in it every single day. Then I think it's hard to get people on board with what your culture is or the changes that you want to make to your culture.

Jamie: [00:17:14] Sure, yeah. Love it. So let me ask you, I want to go back and you said, you know, hey, it took you a while to figure out how to get that cohesive executive team. If you were to be able to summarize, maybe one thing that you'd say, Oh, this is something I learned or this is something that helped us make that switch. What would you would you say really contributed to that? We're working on it. We're working on working on it to oh, now we figured out how to build that cohesive executive team.

Kerry: [00:17:39] I had this idea that as we're growing, if I brought in people who have worked at big companies before and done the things that we're doing, that that would be what I would need. And I almost always failed at bringing them onto the executive management team because we are very much a

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hands on understand messy collaboration type organization and people who come in from big companies, especially with that executive level, you know, they haven't done that work for a long time.

And so when it's like, Well, yeah, OK, we'll go fix it. It's kind of like, Well, that's not what I do. My team fixes. It's like, No, you fix it. And so that was that was definitely I made that mistake a couple of times before I really learned like, I need people who've been in startup environments who are really agile, who aren't afraid to roll up their sleeves and and and get in with the company.

And that's part of understanding your culture and and really defining that so that all kind of went hand in hand. The second thing that I learned is is really about the, you know, the type of people on your team making sure that you have people who are going to fit the norms and expectations and kind of the operating principles of your of your what you want for your team. So for me, I want collaboration, I want communication. I don't want any finger pointing or blaming. I want cool, calm and collected, you know, teamwork, a cohesive team where there's trust, there's communication, there's collaboration. And and so I had to go search. I had to define that.

And then I had to go search for people who really believed in that and wanted to be part of that kind of team. And once I got like the last piece in place, it was magical to keep it happy. Like, Yes, this is what I knew we could be. But if you have people who don't buy into it, then they can't be on the team. Yes, for sure.

Jamie: [00:19:34] Love it. I can actually, as you were describing that first scenario, you know, like, who's the right fit? As far as you know, I've done it before a big company or startup. There are a couple of people I'm thinking of right now who I know who are kind of in that exact same situation right now.

I'm thinking about like, you know, they're hiring people in executive roles who are used to to operating at a much more higher, like not higher. That's the wrong word, but at a different from a different point where everybody else does the work. And I'm just kind of cheerlead a little bit. So, yeah, exactly. Yeah. Doesn't work in my company. Yeah, for sure.

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And I think a lot of our listeners are probably in similar similar positions where it's, you know, Hey, this is this roll up your sleeves. It's, you know, be hands on. You've got to be into the details. Yep, exactly. Yeah. All right.

Well, then let me ask then, because so next up, you're you're kind of expanding and saying, OK, now I've got this executive team, they're working really well together. You know, things are going well there, but you've got to expand to your mid-level managers and how do we get them to work cohesively? And just because the nature of it, it may not be an exact replication, right? So everything that you did with your executive team probably doesn't just replicate.

So what are you either learning or what do you need to figure out next for this next step? Where are you going next with this?

Kerry: [00:20:46] Yeah. Well, that's very insightful. It's exactly right. Mostly because like my team, like they're all, they all work together in charge of their departments, right? Mid-level managers, they have their teams, but there's not necessarily that tight connection. What that happens at the executive management level. And so there's a. So it isn't going to be the same at all.

So there's two things that I'm going to do. One, I'm going to have all of them read Dare to Lead and we're going to really focus on on empathy and armored leadership. So when do we show up with armored leadership and how can we be more empathetic to each other? And then I'm going to use this really great program created by a good friend of mine called Forums at Work.

So I'm part of YPO Young President's Organization organization, and they have these forum experiences where you're in a group of eight of six, seven eight people and you experience, share and you really understand like the top five percent of things that are going on in the bottom five percent. Well, my friend had created this program to be able to replicate that in the workplace.

Kerry: [00:21:52] And so we're going to put all of them through that. So we're going to break them up into teams of six and they'll be very specifically chosen. And we're going to teach them how to have these

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vulnerable communications, these vulnerable conversations of transparency, of understanding of empathy so that they can really build those connections.

Because it's not the work, that's the issue, it's the how do I work with other people when I've got my list of things to do, but I have to go to work across the part mentally to make to execute a lot of these initiatives.

So that's what I'm going to do is try to figure out how do I do this in a way that's really meaningful and easy to to implement. And also that invokes self leadership, which is one of our our core values is self leadership. So it will really be up to those teams to embrace this type of dialog. So it's all about connection building, communication and and and trust.

Jamie: [00:22:54] Yeah, I think you're spot on with the relationships, the interactions, the empathy, vulnerability, all of those things. You're absolutely spot on for all of that.

Kerry: [00:23:02] Yeah, yeah. So we all want right. So why people are leaving. If you look at Gallup Gallup study that they did here a couple of months ago, they released a couple of months ago the top five reasons that people are leaving their companies have nothing to do with money.

It all has to do with not feeling feeling cared about, not feeling like they have purpose at work, not feeling like that. Their manager is treating them fairly right, not feeling connected with their colleagues. Like that is why people are leaving. They're seeking, they're just so seeking connection and and meaning in their relationships. So to me, it's not about the work. It's teaching people how to work together. Then the work will get done. Yeah.

Jamie: [00:23:42] And I think too often we think of it almost like a trade off like, Oh, I really want to have this great people focused culture with, you know, empathy and vulnerability and transparency and all of those things. But we got to get the work out the door, you know, and not recognizing that they actually support each. You know that that supports getting work out the door when you create that environment and help people give the skills in the way, you know, how do we do this? Because it's really uncomfortable for for a lot of us to go in and start having these types of conversations?

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Kerry: [00:24:08] Absolutely. We all have to learn and everybody's going to be able to participate at different levels within that comfort zone. And that's OK. But it's still allows for that deeper. That deeper connection and what I'm focused on is the quality of the hours spent at work. Right. So that's great that you can check off a lot of boxes and get stuff done. But what is that quality of work like? How does it feel? What is your experience when you're working with your colleagues?

If you are in that flow in that zone, you're working well, you've got a work friend, you trust your teammates. That experience is so different than head down. Get stuff out the door. Relationships come second. So to me, we're really focusing on great you're at work eight hours a day. How do we make that the very best experience we can possibly make? And you can only do that if you have good relationships and connections within within your teams, for sure. Yeah, I always say

Jamie: [00:25:08] The leadership is a relationship, and I think what I'm what I'm also hearing from you is to make sure that we recognize it's not just the relationship with your direct reports. So the direct team that you lead that is only one of your teams. Right? And so that peer team is also a super critical team and and you really have to almost like kind of put that first in order to be able to better serve your team. You know, your direct report team, right? Is that like that peer team has? You have to go first with that cross-functional work in relationships.

Kerry: [00:25:37] I totally agree with you. I wrote a blog on this a couple of years ago when the how tough being in middle management is the messy middle right? It is because you do. You have to manage so many different things. You have to manage up, sideways and down. But I do think that peer to peer is so important, and a lot of people don't do that.

Like when you when you ask most people who who's your team, 90 percent of people say the people who report to me. Mm hmm. And they don't say, I'm part of this, this peer management team and I'm part of the overall company's management team. They get so focused on the people they manage. And that's very shortsighted. That is not going to make you successful in a company. You've got to effectively manage sideways end up as well, for sure.

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Jamie: [00:26:23] All right. Well, I feel like we could talk forever. To be honest, this is so much fun. But so but we do have to wrap up. So as we as we wrap up, I just want you to think about so our listeners, our operations executives, operations managers, supervisors. So if you could leave them with some words of either advice or encouragement, what would you leave those listeners with today?

Kerry: [00:26:45] Yeah, I would say it's a journey. So enjoy it. Enjoy it. Like life is about taking steps forward, taking steps backwards, taking steps forward again, and then all of a sudden, you know, the rug gets pulled out on you because the whole world changes. And so, you know, instead of getting frustrated and down, angry, upset, all of those things that are really easy when you don't feel like you're making the progress that you want, remember that is in the challenges.

That the good stuff happens and life is about forward and sideways and backwards motion movement and solving problems and and being resilient when when life throws us curveballs. So embrace that, enjoy the hardship and the challenge and the change because it's going to make you a better person, a better leader if you embrace it with positivity and a Can-Do attitude.

And you know, it's OK if you get mad, it's OK if you cry. I've had lots of those moments, too, but you know you always got to come back to this. Like, I'm going to learn so much from there's this. There's a gift in in the journey and there's a gift in in the adversity that I face on this journey. So embrace it and enjoy it and learn from it.

Jamie: [00:27:58] Oh, fantastic. What a great note to close on. Kerry, you're doing so much stuff. We're going to put links to your website and I think you have a podcast and you write blogs and you speak and you're writing a book. So we'll make sure that we have all of those links in our show notes. So if you want to go and follow Kerry and learn more about the work that she's doing, you can do that through those links. Thank you so much.

Kerry: [00:28:20] Thanks for having me, Jamie. This is a lot of fun.

Jamie: [00:28:26] Well, I told you it was fun. You could probably hear just a high level of alignment and how Kerry and I approach leadership, relationships and business. And it was great to hear her

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perspectives as a successful CEO and someone who has found success but who is very open and honest about her path in her journey and saying, Hey, I didn't figure this out all at once. It took time.

Now you can hear and read more through Kerry's website. It's Kerry Sagan's and that's Kerry. So Kerry Sig Incom and also through her podcast Reflect Forward. We'll put all of those links in our show notes. You can find those at ProcessPlusResults.Com/podcast now for you.

Here's your next step reflection. What would it mean for you, for your organization, for team members to build a more agile team? A team of people who have multiple strengths who can define and solve problems systematically, who can think through challenges, even the ones that no one can even predict today what those challenges will be in the future and who can work together to do so as a team. What would be the impact of that? How would that benefit you, your team, your organization and individuals on your team? And then what's stopping you from doing it? How do you work through those obstacles to make it happen anyways to go on that journey? Kerry was just a fabulous way to kick off our Q one executive series.

Jamie: [00:29:58] And here's what the next four weeks bring. Justin Woodard joins us to talk about achieving team alignment through leadership communication and how we talk and engage with people. Then Jeff Welch is going to join us to talk about training and when and how it can be an effective countermeasure to performance gaps and when it's not. We'll then be joined by Chris Wilson, who's going to share a story about improving flow in order entry processes to create more value. And finally, we wrap up with Greg Jacobson, who's going to talk about start up to scale up kind of that process of leading culture beyond your direct team when you can't directly interact with everybody.

All right. Really excited for this executive series. And I just encourage you to subscribe or follow our podcast on your favorite podcast app so that you don't miss an episode until next time.

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