

Improve Your Team's Order Entry Flow to Create More Value with Chris Wilson | 080

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.

Before we start our episode today, I want to give a special happy birthday shout out to my absolute most favorite coach in the world. My baby brother turning 40 years old today. You know, he coaches high school basketball out in northeast Georgia, and I am always so inspired watching him pour into those young men. He is definitely a leader. Happy birthday, Parker.

All right, now, let's get down to business. Have you ever known something? Or maybe you didn't know it, but you thought it right? You're going down a continuous improvement path and you think that it's going to make it easier and better for customers to do business with you. But maybe there was also some nervousness in production that kind of on the flip side, it might make it harder for the team to manufacture, produce or serve well. Then tune in to this story.

Today's executive series guest is our second guest from St. Louis for the series, actually. Chris Wilson, Vice President of operations at Wilson Manufacturing, which is a full service tool and die supplier to the flex-o graphic printing industry. Now Chris Partners with the President to lead production in two St. Louis facilities and also oversees special projects, operations of two satellite facilities and working with sales, accounting and I.T.. So let's dive in.

Jamie: [00:01:59] Chris, welcome to the show today.

Chris: [00:02:01] Hi, Jamie.

Jamie: [00:02:02] All right, I'm so glad to jump in and chat with you about leadership and service and improvement, but first, let's learn a little bit about you. Tell us about a maybe a value of mantra, a principle, something that kind of embodies your beliefs about leadership.

Chris: [00:02:19] When I think about leadership, it's always been leading by doing. So, I've always been involved in all the aspects of the production line and throughout the whole business. I found that it's easier

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to work with people and to guide them and teach them if you already know how to do the job. And they tend to have a little more respect for you when you understand what they're doing and going through every day.

Jamie: [00:02:43] Yeah, I think there's something about credibility. You know, when you when you're leading a team to have that credibility and respect, and that's definitely one way to go about getting it, for sure. Well, then before we jump in and talking about improvement, why don't you tell us a little bit about your organization? Who did your organization serve and how do you create value

Chris: [00:03:03] At Wilson Manufacturing we support the flexographic printing industry as well as other converters using rotary die cutting. So think of if you go to the grocery store and you're walking down the aisle, your food packaging and labeling and your medical supplies, all that stuff is cut out and produced with rotary die cutting and printing. So that's the majority of our clientele. We also get into other industries such as automotive and gasket and fabricating, as well as helping out the OEM builders of equipment is on top of that.

Jamie: [00:03:38] Got it. So you're not doing the printing as much as you're making the parts that serve the printing of the flexographic printing industry?

Chris: [00:03:46] Yes, all the tooling that goes into the printing process to produce the end product.

Jamie: [00:03:51] All right. Awesome. And tell me about kind of value. How does your organization create value or what are your customers really value in the work that you do?

Chris: [00:04:00] So while some manufacturing has always been known for our service, that's been our key goal from the beginning was to give the best service in the industry to our clientele. And it's really helped us grow to where we are today by having the fastest turnarounds on quotes and being the most transparent with customers.

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They've always been our highest priority, so we always try to focus everything we do around supporting them. So often they get they get an order and we have to produce tooling and we go order to ship in twenty four to seventy two hours very often. So it's a very quick turnaround on a custom made product.

Jamie: [00:04:38] Yes, for sure. I was not in flex of graphic printing, but I did a big part of my career in printing in a lot of digital kind of quick print. And so this idea of these fast turns that, you know, it's not this manufacturing process, that's a four month long process, right?

Chris: [00:04:55] Correct. Yeah. And with digital that side of the industry has really sped up the turnaround times. And when we get into some of our flexible tooling, we're doing order to ship in as little as eight hours.

Jamie: [00:05:08] Wow. Fantastic. Well, you and I actually met at the Printing United Continuous improvement conference and through the Continuous improvement community within that printing industry. So I want to just start there. Tell us a little bit about why Continuous improvement thinking and methodology is important to your organization. Like why C.I.

Chris: [00:05:31] So with our industry as fast as technology comes in from the printing press builders and the material builders and just manufacturing in itself. Things change very rapidly. So we have to be able to be flexible and adaptive to anything that comes up. And when we get a customer that calls and says, Hey, I need to make something new and different, we don't have months to build out a plan. We have hours or days.

So we have to be constantly improving. And that just let us down a path of continuous improvement naturally within our building and trying to be a little more formal and organized with it. I started joining groups like the Continuous Improvement conference and just trying to learn how can we do this in a more organized manner to be more flexible down the road? So we're always building and trying to look ahead, not just in the right now, for sure.

Jamie: [00:06:30] And I love that you have this resource to really explore. I know I love that this CI group here within Printing United is industry specific because it's kind of this smaller, more intimate group where

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you're really able to learn from each other and really dialog and build those relationships while you're also learning about improvement methodology.

Chris: [00:06:53] Yes, and it's a little more relatable. So I think that was my biggest problem. When I got into Lean, I was looking at manufacturing and everything was Toyota. You're making a thousand or a million of the same product. And that's not what we do at Wilson. We make one of everything. So it was a little harder to look at economies of scale in that aspect. So getting with groups like printing United, I'm seeing it more from an industry that I can relate to and put a little more scale to it.

Jamie: [00:07:23] Now in Lean thinking continuous improvement, we really often talk about creating more value. Right? That's kind of why I always start this discussion this dialog with a question about how does your organization create value? So I want to just ask you as you were thinking about how to create more value for customers and delivering for customers, what was a challenge that you were you were up against that you were facing?

Chris: [00:07:48] Focusing on customers, we were trying to find a way to make the quoting process easier for them. Traditionally, they were having to call in with information or send in emails. So about 15 years ago, we created our Wilson portal through our website, where customers could log in and easily quote simple products real basic tooling through the internet.

By doing that, to give them the ability to get the quotes whenever they need it and more real time than waiting on somebody here to return information to them. Over the years, obviously, competitors start to catch on and start to build out their own versions. So two years ago, we decided to start revamping this and trying to build it out a little more in depth. And as we did it, we started realizing that there was a lot of other things that we could include.

So other tooling that we had not included in the past and some other services like order track or more in depth order tracking. Customers can pull invoices and customers can look at details about their machinery that are listed in our system and really gave them a more hands on approach to our system. And it's evolved through customer development over the last two years as we've implemented this.

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Jamie: [00:09:10] Yeah. Well, you know what I love about what you're talking about there is. So there's this Shigeo Shingo quote where he's quoted as saying there are four purposes of improvement easier, better, faster, cheaper. And then the second part of that is those four appear in the order of priority. And what I was really hearing you say was how could we make it easier and better for our customers to get what they need when they need it?

Chris: [00:09:34] And that's absolutely what it was, and that was our original thinking behind it. And then on the backside of it, it made it easier for us and the overhead to cover that. So as we developed it, the idea was rather than hiring many more customer service people to help enter orders.

Can we have a website that helps complete that process rather than just a quote? Can we drive it from a quote to an order? All in one shot. And as we built it out, it worked out much easier than we had expected. And to your point, the the easier and better turned into the cost savings on the back end of it.

Jamie: [00:10:16] Yes, as it does when we make things easier and better. Ok, so let me let me say then so you've got this portal and you're kind of giving more, I guess, capabilities to customers to order what they need when they need it kind of in that self service on their time. So they don't have to pick up the phone and call a sales rep or a customer service rep in your, you know, at your plant.

Chris: [00:10:41] That's correct. We when we started with this and we were beta testing, we found customers were logging on out on the coast before or after hours here in St. Louis and able to put in quotes and get and start their orders. And where that rolled into was. Customers out east at five 30 St. Louis time in the morning were entering orders, pushing them out live and production already had the order before sales ever walked in the door.

Jamie: [00:11:10] Mm. Ok, so I'm definitely seeing how this can really help your speed to market in your lead times for customers, and you don't have as much waiting waste in production, but let me pause here for just a second because I have a question for you. Ok, so right. So here you've got this system. Clients are putting in their orders after sales has gone home, and it sounds like those orders are just flowing straight into manufacturing. Is that just real quick? Yes or no? Is that am I following?

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Chris: [00:11:39] Yes, that is correct.

Jamie: [00:11:40] Yes. Ok, so then here's my question. When you first started talking to the manufacturing team about, Hey, these orders are going to come in and they're just going to go straight to you. What was their reaction like? How did that those first conversations go?

Chris: [00:11:55] Yeah. So it's a little scary. And for the part that customers are entering orders that they've never done before? How do we know everything is correct? How do we know all the information there? And how do we know the products are going to get made to what the customer really requested? And we tackled that really by putting a lot of checks and balances into the system, so they have to have everything entered.

It has them double check to make sure that what they've entered is correct. They can't just push the product out. They can also attach paperwork from their end to it, so somebody here can double check it in the morning whenever sales does get in the office. And then when it does get to production, the customers put it in. So we've actually skipped a step in the process.

No longer did they create paperwork, send it to us, and then somebody else has to enter it. We're starting from the beginning. So you don't have as many hands touching the paper touch on the order as what we did before. So fewer people less chance for something to get enter.

Jamie: [00:13:03] Mm hmm. Yeah, all that miscommunication and interpretation, and yeah, but I know, I know I've worked with them before. They always get it this way. Yes. Yeah. Yeah, I can imagine as I hear you talking about this, I could imagine there were some nervousness in production. The production is a little nervous about what that was going to look like.

And so there had to have been some level of trust for them to kind of go with it. Working with you all and then it sound like you were really take you and the team were really taking into account those worries and thinking about, well, how can we, you know, kind of, I guess, make this work and flow considering some of these concerns and risks?

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Chris: [00:13:46] Yeah. So as we talked to the production team about it and we explained to them what was going to happen, they they obviously were worried about it flowing. But what ended up happening in the end was as orders are coming out and they're not having errors or any sort of delays in the process of releasing the orders. Orders are coming out throughout all hours of the day, so I have customers log in in early in the morning, I got customers that are maybe a small mom and pop shop that at the end of the day at eight p.m., they're finally getting down to their computer to work and they want to put an order in.

But nobody's here to answer the phone now. They can just do it on their own. So on the end of that, now production is not getting flooded with all these orders. First thing in the morning, they're seeing orders throughout a whole twenty four hour period while we're open and for production purposes. So they're constantly feeding you work into the cycle and it spread the load out a little bit throughout the day.

Jamie: [00:14:45] Yes, I love that, so you've really got two things, one is the is not having to wait where they're their order isn't getting hung up because I don't have a salesperson available right now. So we speed it up there. And then the second is it sounds like it really helped to level right. What you're talking about there is really leveling so that you don't have, oh, morning sales processes, everything that came in over the last X number of hours. And now you've got a big dump of orders hitting production.

Chris: [00:15:13] Yes. And that job that came over at five hundred one last night after the salesperson left is getting released at eight 30 in the morning and it's now super hot, right? Oh yeah, I got them released last night and we could have eased it through the production line and had another, whatever, 12 14 hours where the production that we've lost. If we waited till morning to release it,

Jamie: [00:15:37] Yeah, oh, I could definitely see how reducing the number of hot orders, urgent orders, same day orders, whatever you want to call it, from a standpoint of, you know, we waited on it and now it's it's become urgent. It sounds like, you know, this probably actually helped production

Chris: [00:15:53] Quite a bit. Yeah, took a lot of stress off of them. They're not hearing from the sales team. I got to ship this. I got to ship this because things are just naturally flowing through in a much more timely manner.

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Jamie: [00:16:04] Yeah. Awesome. And then so how about customer feedback customers like it, do the customers love it?

Chris: [00:16:11] We are still trying to get more customers involved in it, and obviously that's a selling point with our team. We release it during COVID. So it's been a little bit of a struggle to get out and talk to customers about the product. But the ones that we're using our portal prior to the new portal going online have migrated over very successfully and found a lot of value in it. We are now getting about 20 percent of all of our orders entered through the website instead of through a customer service person.

Jamie: [00:16:46] All right, awesome. Well, let's talk about this then, so you have this, you know, challenge, which is how do we create more value for customers? One of those things being kind of the speed and the timing that we've talked about. What would you say is you are working through? I don't know if I should call it a project, but this effort, this effort to create more value. What were some either actions or tactics that that you learned kind of worked well? What worked well through the process?

Chris: [00:17:12] Yeah. Our biggest thing was when we started this, we've we tried to do some similar things before and it was always, you give it to the IT team and we wait and eventually we'll see an end result. And when we started this project, we said, no. If we want to see this through the way we're expecting it, then we're going to meet weekly and we set a weekly meeting every Thursday at 10 30.

We sat down as a team. Everybody there was five of us involved in it and everybody said in the conference room with the IT guy who was writing the program and we went through and whether it was OK and now needs to do this or we want to add this feature, or just simply, I don't like the way that looks. Can we move these boxes around on the screen? And can we change this wording? Everything was going over every week.

Anything new that they had accomplished in writing the software was examined and then as it came to completion, we had time to go through and write test test orders to start debugging it as a team and figuring out what the best workflow. And that really evolved the system more because we got in there and said, Oh, if you're going to do that, why can't we do this? And let's have this feature now? And while it

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made it easier for it to build it in baby steps more or less, it allowed us to have a more hands on approach and everybody was accountable for their part of the project.

Jamie: [00:18:38] Yes, I love it. All that collaboration and then that cadence, being able to fine tune as you go not waiting until we have an end product, then go, Oh, this isn't what we wanted.

Chris: [00:18:48] Exactly. Yeah, yeah.

Jamie: [00:18:51] All right. So then on the flip side, I would like to also figure out what are we learning, where maybe things not go as we expected? So what what maybe it was a lesson learned or something that didn't go as well as you had you'd expected it to.

Chris: [00:19:03] Yes. When we started the project, we initially were just trying to modify and upgrade our existing portal that we started with. And as we started doing that, we kept asking it. We'll add this feature and add this feature. Can we do this now? And they were getting very frustrated with us, and what we learned was that system had a lot of limitations.

And obviously, it's not IT people. The rest of us didn't understand some of that. And what we realized was all of our brainstorming and ideas that we had in the beginning. We should have been involving IT from that point. We waited until we needed them to start modifying things to include them. And it was really an eye opener when they came back and they said, you know, would be a lot easier just to start from scratch and write this all over.

And we're thinking, OK, now we're talking months of project before we'll get anywhere and turned out not to be the case, but it was a much cleaner look when we started fresh because it didn't have all these patches and weird add ons to the screen that already existed. Oh, it was involving everybody from day one that needed to be in it. All the stakeholders involved should have been where we started and we know that now going into some of these other projects to include it a little sooner.

Jamie: [00:20:26] Yeah. You know, I love how these two. Like, hey, what worked well and what was the lesson learned? They really fed into each other in the sense that this collaborative, you know, kind of

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cadence from worked really well, but you actually didn't learn that until you were a little ways in and you're like, Oh, you know, we now we know what to do. We just got to start that sooner. Yes.

Chris: [00:20:46] Yeah, it was definitely a different point of view from there. And then our end being salespeople and management, we we thought it was just a quick add, a few buttons on the screen and we'll be good.

Jamie: [00:21:00] Yeah, for sure. All right, well, let's talk about maybe something coming up next. What would you say is one of the next challenges your organization is working on or plans to work on, particularly as it relates to kind of improvement, thinking and culture?

Chris: [00:21:16] One of our major projects that we're taking on currently is stemming from COVID as we've dealt with labor market changes. We notice that we had a high turnover rate in our first 30 to 60 days of employment, and a lot of times employees were even just ghosting us after a few days. And we weren't sure why. So we started interviewing employees that were making it past their probationary period and really didn't come up with a whole lot of clear answers.

But a lot of it, we found, came down to just the on-boarding process. And just, you know, can we improve that? On boarding, as far as getting employees, feeling more comfortable with wheels, manufacturing, so we worked with a couple of our managers and came up with a process that as an employee starts their first day, they go through and they do the typical HR functions and the safety trainings, and then they're put into their department. And what happens to them next was where we kind of fell apart.

So we started organizing that a little better and created a an actual checklist of, OK, well, we need to make sure this person gets trained on how to use the time clock properly, because in the past it seemed that a lot of people just took for granted. But we have a time clock.

Everybody uses a time clock, so they should just know how to do it and. Everybody's time clocks are a little different, so are we we're going to make sure we sit down and we go through this and then make sure somebody shows them the break room and doesn't just assume that, oh, the safety guy showed

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them or, oh, you know, now it's assigned, this person is going to do this part of the onboarding process and then taking that a step further.

Chris: [00:23:07] Just a more formal training program for each department. And we just kicked it off with one department kind of applicant that we had and it worked out really well, just taking those people from day one. And what is the timeline for training and what do they need to be learning? And rather than just a broad overview of, oh, they need to learn how to do these 20 things?

Let's break it down and they need to learn the first five and the first week and then manager is the manager of the department is going to come over and work with the trainer, and they're going to evaluate and say, Yes, this person has learned those things and is ready to move on to phase two rather than just waiting until the end of the probationary period and saying, Well, they haven't learned all this. What's wrong? We're going to break it down into smaller sections.

And it seemed to work very well with the first person that we have tried this with and. As we develop in another department, we're going to see how this this grows and escalates and hopefully from what we're seeing is make that onboarding process a little smoother and giving those people a little more comfort in working here.

Jamie: [00:24:18] Yeah. And really, you're kind of putting this putting a process in place, putting some standards in place so that you have, you know, everybody can know is on the same page and knows what's happening. And I feel like this kind of brings us back full circle to easier and better. Except this time we're talking about easier and better, not just for your team who's doing the onboarding, but for the new hire. They have this better experience. It's easier for them to acclimate. It's easier for them to, you know, get around and know what they need to do when all those things and kind of bringing this around and creating value for those new hires that are onboarding with us.

Chris: [00:24:52] Yes. Yeah. And that's that's really the the goal is just to. As you said, make it, make them more comfortable, make it easier for them and. Hopefully that reduce our turnover rate and that that entry window.

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Jamie: [00:25:08] Yeah. Fantastic. All right, so, Chris, as we wrap up thinking about our listeners who are improvement minded operations executives and managers, what words of encouragement or advice would you leave our listeners with today?

Chris: [00:25:24] So my biggest advice is when I started my Lean journey. Like I said earlier, it was focused on manufacturing and everything was about reducing your error rate down to one hundredth of a percent in total production. And we focused a lot on the production side, but what I forgot was I have a whole lot of support team from my sales and accounting and I.T. departments that I need to include in my Lean journey and bringing them involved and having them be part of some of our training classes and getting them to think in that same manner has really been a bigger payoff than focusing on the production side.

Mostly because in manufacturing, we were naturally moving in the Lean direction. It just maybe wasn't as formal of a process. So, including our sales team and getting their input on things and also allowing us to give them feedback helps streamline that communication between the two areas, then it as well getting helping them get a little more organized and having them understand what we're doing. More on the shop side from a Lean perspective and a continuous improvement perspective has really paid off because we're not constantly trying to fix and repair and just patch. Now we're thinking ahead a little further and what can we do to make sure we're where we need to be and two, three, five years?

Jamie: [00:26:53] No, I love it, very good. All right, well, Chris, thank you so much for joining us today. It's been just a great conversation.

Chris: [00:27:01] Yes. Thank you, Jamie. I enjoy coming on.

Don't you love this story? I can imagine I can kind of close my eyes and picture it and hear it and chuckle at, you know, maybe what it might have been like with some operations folks being really nervous about orders getting dropped straight into production? Oh, but it really figured out how to mitigate many of the risks and help work to flow through the system, making it easier and better for the team members and also making it easier and better for clients.

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And that brings us to your next step. Think about what your customers value. Where is the struggle in how they do business with you? How might you enrich customer value? Think through it. Write it down and then dialog with another improvement minded colleague. Now, side note 2022 will be the fourth year that I've spoken or taught at the Printing United Continuous improvement conference. And if you're in the printing industry or related industry, or even if not, but you find that you do more of that, you know, made to order work, then you might find it valuable.

So the 2022 conference is in Scottsdale in May, and we'll put a link to that website in our show notes, which you can find at ProcessPlusResults.com/podcast. Now, I hope you are loving this Q1 executive series. Next up, we close out this series with Greg Jacobson, co-founder and CEO of Kinesis, a software solution that really helps you spread Continuous improvement culture.

And if you missed previous episodes, you must go back and listen to Kerry Siggin's and Justin Woodard share about culture, building a leadership bench and creating alignment through your communication. And then last week, Jeff Welch gave us a peek inside the function of training and learning and development. Until next time.