

Breaking the Telling Habit with Katie Anderson | 104

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.

Jamie: [00:00:29] Jamie here. And I am back with some new conversations today about coaching. Thanks for hanging in there with me and keep listening because I think you will love the specific recommendations that today's guest shares. Now, over the last few months, we have talked about some different leadership roles or interaction types that you will have as a leader and remember this continuum from telling to asking to listening and all the way on the left, on the far end of telling is directing. And then you get into sharing, or you could call it advising, then teaching.

As we start to enter the asking territory, kind of split between telling and asking. Then we get into coaching and finally connecting on the far right end of listening. So these are these leadership interactions telling, then asking than listening, and really those interaction types, directing, sharing, teaching, coaching and connecting. So you can see a picture of this at our show notes processplusresults.com/podcast. And this is episode number 104. You can find episode 104 and see a picture of this, which by the way, is still so fun to say, like a three digit episode number.

So I want to just reframe us and get us back to that context because in some of these recent episodes we talked about the telling side, right? Sometimes we do need to direct, to set direction, to set expectations, to give feedback, and sometimes we need to mentor or advise or share our recommendations from our place of expertise.

Jamie: [00:02:04] And sometimes we need to teach. So I know that, like, coaching is all the rage, but if you are just coaching and connecting as a leader, you're going to struggle because leadership involves interacting across the entire continuum. So in those previous episodes, I shared some client experiences to be more effective at some of those telling activities. And now we are shifting to the coaching and connecting side of the continuum, and that's why we replayed the episodes that's not coaching and one on ones that don't suck because we're really digging in to coaching today with our guest, Katie Anderson.

Breaking the Telling Habit with Katie Anderson | 104

Now, Katie has been a friend for several years and has been on the podcast before. In episode 21, she was talking about Intentional Leadership Episode 95. She was with Tracy O'Rourke and myself as we talked about collaboration, not competition. And Katie's joining us again on Travel. She's traveling and still joined the show with us today.

But one of the areas that Katie and I both teach mentor and coach on is the coaching style of leadership. Katie is very creative and she teaches what she has named as and what she calls breaking the telling habit. And that's why I invited Katie to join today. I really think that you are better served by hearing both of us kind of go in and have this conversation than just me. So let's jump in. Katie, welcome to the show today.

Katie: [00:03:34] Hi, Jamie. So good to be back with you.

Jamie: [00:03:36] Yeah, I know. It's I guess, the third time that you've been on the show, so we're excited to have some conversations. But first, I want for those folks who don't know you yet. Why don't you just let us know a little bit about the work that you do?

Katie: [00:03:51] Thanks. Well, my name is Katie Anderson. I am a leadership coach and consultant based in the San Francisco Bay Area. Although I've lived in six countries outside of the US as well, I'm the bestselling author of a book called Learning to Lead, Leading to Learn. And I'm a professional speaker who really is excited about empowering people to make the impact they want and create the habits aligned with their purpose.

Jamie: [00:04:18] Awesome. Well, we will put all of your links to like your website and your book as well as to the other shows and episodes that you've been on with us in our show notes. So folks, remember, you can go to process plus results dot com forward slash podcast to get those.

But today, Katie, we're talking a little bit about coaching and this idea that you kind of coined a breaking the telling habit. We've had some conversations on the podcast recently about, you know, this continuum from more telling to asking, listening and these different roles that we play as a leader. And we have to do

Breaking the Telling Habit with Katie Anderson | 104

do different ones. And so you and I've had some conversations about this, so why don't we we start off. What do you mean when you say the telling habit?

Katie: [00:05:03] Yes. So as human beings, we all have a telling habit. You know, I'm holding my hand up right now saying I have a confession to make. You know, we are habituated to come forward and advocate for our ideas, share the right answer or what we think is the right answer all the way from school and to our early careers.

And we're often not even aware of how often we are telling everyone our suggestions and ideas. And it's really linked to often our desire to be helpful and not realizing that in many cases it's not so helpful. So our telling habit is that we're just coming forward with a lot of advocacy without as much inquiry, and we need to find a better balance in our lives. So as you said, it's not that it's a continuum, it's not that telling is wrong and that only asking is good, but it's about having a greater balance in how we show up.

Jamie: [00:05:58] Yeah. So let's think through this then a little bit for our ops leaders and executives that are out there, you know, in their interactions with people, whether that's folks on your team or colleagues or vendors, suppliers, all of that.

These are all of the possible interactions where we might slip into this telling habit, right. Where we kind of show up. And it sounds like you're saying, hey, for a lot of us, our natural state is that we tend to fall into the into telling an advocacy and maybe inquiry isn't necessarily our default. Here's where we go first.

Katie: [00:06:29] Yeah, so it also depends on what's the purpose, right? And so sometimes your purpose as a leader or an executive is to be clear on what's the standard or what's the expectations or what are our requirements, say, from this vendor for this project. So that is appropriate telling.

It's really that setting the direction or the target and in the standard when our intention though is to create greater understanding or to keep ownership with problem of problem solving or responsibility for moving forward towards a goal with someone else, when we then are giving all of our answers and our ideas or suggestions for next steps, we're really taking away that ownership and putting, I guess, limitations and boxes around the thinking.

Breaking the Telling Habit with Katie Anderson | 104

So the first and foremost thing is to know what's your purpose in your role in that interaction? Is it to be setting the direction and providing clarity, or are you trying to help get greater understanding of a problem or a situation or what next steps might be? And then that that's what sort of should align what what actions you take?

Jamie: [00:07:37] Yeah. So let's say that I do want to develop, right? So I'm having these interactions and you know, my goal, my primary goal here is, is that development of another leader on my team, for example. Why? I mean, like I, I have expertise in totally. I don't I want to mentor them and tell them what they should do.

Katie: [00:07:59] Well, that is a great question, Jamie. And so the main reason is to take reflection for yourself is coming to the answer the most important thing or helping that person come to the answer and to develop their own capabilities and skills around problem solving and honestly, to keep the sort of ownership and engagement with that person.

So we I mean, think about it. We all have that friend. You know, when you have a problem and you're like, Oh, just let me tell you about this problem. And also they're like, You should do this. How about that? Why don't you try that? How do you feel? Yeah, just want to run.

Jamie: [00:08:35] Away and leave me alone.

Katie: [00:08:36] And that person is coming forward wanting to help you, but actually having the opposite impact. And so the same thing is happening for us in the work environment too, when we are trying to be helpful. Sometimes we well, we're often in this habit of seeing that being helpful is about us having all the ideas, but we often don't even know what's really happening in this situation.

We're just making assumptions that our own experiences are applicable to here, but also like we're taking away that opportunity for somebody to to think about it for themselves. And so it's really for just checking for our own selves. Like, is it the most important for me to have the answer here, or is it actually the

Breaking the Telling Habit with Katie Anderson | 104

process of the discovery and the learning, the more important thing here and to make a tradeoff for yourself and for the person you're working with too.

And it can be frustrating. That takes a long time. It takes longer. But but again, you're making assumptions that your past experience is actually the same as what's happening here. And you may not have any true context. So you're you know, you might even be not, you know, might not even be solving the right problem. And hey.

Jamie: [00:09:46] Yeah, well, and you made a comment about, you know, sometimes we don't recognize how much we're telling. So can you tell us a little bit about how maybe this telling might be disguised in other ways, what it might sound like where we don't actually even recognize we're doing it?

Katie: [00:10:01] Yeah. So often we think we are asking questions, but there really are statements or ideas or suggestions with the question mark on the end. So I like to say that like wolves, the wolves disguised as a sheep, you know, like in that sheep's clothing, it's our quest. Our idea is disguised as a question.

So these are these sneaky letter how questions that are like, how about trying my great idea? Have you thought about doing X, Y and Z? What about this other thing I'm thinking about? How about this other thing? So you're basically saying, how about why don't you try here? Yes, but it's like a question mark, and then it's really your idea and it has the same impact is saying suggestion after suggestion as truly as a statement.

And so if we can start hearing all of these leading and prompting questions that come out of our mouths and think, huh, am I really wanting to ask an open question and let somebody else think, how could I reframe this as a genuine what or how type of question that doesn't have an answer embedded in it? Yes, that is the number one. If you can switch that, it will open up so much more thinking. And then the other thing to be aware of is when you ask those closed ended questions can be answered yes or no sometimes can be helpful for when you have need clarity, but or when you're asking a multi choice questions like is it this or that or that, We're actually putting boxes and frames around the possibilities rather than being open.

Breaking the Telling Habit with Katie Anderson | 104

So I always encourage people, if you're hearing sort of multiple choice or yes or no or these ideas disguised as a question, stop and think, how could this be a genuine open what or how question And that is that is the transformative. When we can do this, we have really, truly broken our telling habit. Yeah.

Jamie: [00:12:01] Let me tell you about the moment where this like was I mean, it was it wasn't like where it clicked. It was like, like, oh my gosh, I'm still doing it moment, right? Yes. So I was I was at the time I was reading Humble Inquiry. And so, you know, I was like, all in this space of like curiosity, right?

And all those kind of stuff, as I in my leadership of trying to bring that more of that in and I was on I was there kind of a regional ops manager, I was visiting a site and I was doing a walk with a plant manager. We were looking at I don't even remember what it was, but there was this problem, whatever it was that we were looking at. And I said, Huh? I wonder what would happen if you did. Blah, blah, blah, blah, blah.

Katie: [00:12:38] Yeah.

Jamie: [00:12:39] And I was like, I was proud of myself, right? Like, I'm curiosity. I wonder what would happen and I'm not. Right. And the manager called his assistant manager over. He said, Hey, come over. And then directed him to go do what I had just kind of brought up.

It really was sincere curiosity from the standpoint, like, I had no idea what would happen. I wondered what would happen. I didn't. I wasn't trying to drop breadcrumbs and lead to this place. But when I saw that happen, like I asked this question that I thought was from a place of curiosity, the manager, that plant manager then took it and then directed his assistant manager to go and do the exact same thing. And that was when I was like, Oh my gosh, I'm up here teaching this stuff and I'm still doing it. And I had no idea.

Katie: [00:13:25] Oh, I know, it's I. It's horrifying when you actually realize. I mean, I had a similar situation. Gosh, it was probably a decade ago and I hired an external coach to come in and help me and

Breaking the Telling Habit with Katie Anderson | 104

the team that I was growing. We had about 20 people directly reporting to me. And I was also where all the internal change agents in our organization.

And this is also why I love to work with like the internal change team, because we often think we're more effective and impactful than we are. And so she spent the day shadowing me, both doing coaching sessions with leaders in the organization as well as holding a team meeting for me. And I remember this like so vividly. You know, I was I was really excited for her to come back into my office and give me some feedback on the day. And I knew, you know, there's always opportunities for improvement. And but I thought I think things had gone pretty well. And what she told me, like, just floored me. She's like, Katie, I know you really care about developing people and like coaching all these leaders and your team, but like. You're interrupting people all the time.

And like you sit patiently for a minute and then you're just jumping in with all your ideas. Or, you know, I can see that you're just like all of a sudden contributing all your ideas, like, as if you were a team member rather than trying to really guide some other people's thinking and that you were asking all of these leading questions as well.

Katie: [00:14:47] And I was like, Oh my God, like, I'm here teaching, as you said, humble inquiry to the organization. And I was blind to even my own habits. And it was so helpful, though, to have that feedback. And I think this is what gets back to this concept of intention for me is that, you know, it's about understanding the impact you want to have and your purpose and then what are your actions really aligned with that impact or not?

But once we can start to have awareness of how the things we're doing and saying are not necessarily always having impacts about what we want, we can start changing that. So for me it also had to learn patience of so part of our telling habit. There's a few components of the telling habit. One is, you know, we're asking all these suggestive questions which are really telling, but two, it's not giving the space for other people to think. So like I was interrupting people not because I wanted to shut them down, but because I was so excited to share my ideas and contribute.

Breaking the Telling Habit with Katie Anderson | 104

Katie: [00:15:44] And also, you know, I was seeing I was disconnected with what my role and my purpose was in the moment. Like it was no longer about me being the team member brainstorming together. I was there to really hear what they were thinking first. And it wasn't that my ideas and expertise are not valuable in that situation, but if I'm wanting them to really take ownership, I need to hear what they have to think first.

And so being able to make a few changes like slowing down, counting to ten, being aware of what types of questions I was asking, and also understanding my role in the purpose really just was so transformative to me. And it's not. It's not that hard. Or I should say it's quite simple, but it's actually quite challenging. You know, it's like these simple things to do, but they can have a dramatic impact if we can just slow down a little bit more and hold back with offering our ideas just a little bit longer.

It's so powerful and that's really how we can make this shift to be more effective. Leaders and coaches and I say leaders at all levels from whether or not you're a frontline manager to a senior executive, this is the number one skill to develop and the habits to break.

Jamie: [00:16:58] Yeah, well, and I think too, it's what I've noticed just for myself, right? So I'm going to be super vulnerable here on a podcast is great, right? Let's just put it all out there. But is that, is that as I've been in some fractional roles recently that have been high pressure, you know, like we're failing a customer, we're failing customers, we've got to get some things turned around quickly.

And I've found that it's like it's so easy to slip all the way back, right to so easy to slip all the way back into that directive, more command and control style. And it's not that I think in this situation, there were definitely times where I would need to do more telling more direction than what I might do in a normal scenario. Right. With that or hey, we're having regular one on ones and we've got this relationship and we're building, you know, we're kind of working through toward our vision and we've got these goals and all that kind of stuff, right?

And so I think that, that yeah, maybe this, this situation did and need to have a little bit more telling. But what happened is it became it was it was not purposeful, it was not intentional. I wasn't choosing I guess that's what I would say. I wasn't choosing actively choosing, Oh, I'm going to tell in this conversation. It

Breaking the Telling Habit with Katie Anderson | 104

was me falling back into it and catching myself sometimes days later going, Oh my God. Oh, that was so bad, right?

Katie: [00:18:25] Yeah, yeah. I mean, so great, great point. And thank you for being vulnerable. I mean, I think for us both or all of us, the more we can share those challenges or those failures, you might call that it helps. We helps each other. But that sense of being reactive is why we also need to keep strengthening and practicing our habits of inquiry, of slowing down a little bit because you actually never break a habit, you only create stronger ones.

And so our old habits come up under stress, under time pressure, under feeling like we're running from here to there. And so it's so easy to fall back on those default these those default habits. So first, don't beat yourself up, but it's like, okay, what can I do do moving forward on that? And there are times that are like true crises that need us to just be all hands on deck. Whatever expertise we have or ideas we need to just try and fix things now. But we get stuck in this habit of seeing everything as a five alarm fire that needs to be fixed now. And one of the unintended consequences of us telling other people what to do and how to do it is we actually take on the burden of that problem and the responsibility for doing it.

So we actually kind of are in this vicious cycle of feeling like I don't have time to ask questions or slow down for other people to do some thinking because I have so many problems on my, you know, that are I'm burdened with, I need to solve and to take responsibility for. And then I got so I just got to tell. And so we just get stuck in this, stuck in this. So it's like, how can you take that intention, pause and say, even in even under these time pressures, it's like, okay, like, what's the trade off of like asking one or two questions? You know, how do we hold back just a little bit longer? Yeah. So maybe it not be the, you know, with the perfection, but what is better look like?

Jamie: [00:20:20] Well, yeah, that's what I think too is really stood out to me as well as I was kind of reflecting on this experience and thinking about how I think it's really is like the real life for our operations executives and managers out there. It's like that's they're like, Oh yeah, that's my life. Thank you.

Breaking the Telling Habit with Katie Anderson | 104

And but when I was thinking as I was reflecting, I was like, you know what? It's. It doesn't have to be that I go all the way to this full on coaching. You know, let me ask these questions and let you find your own path kind of standpoint. But even if we just start to shift a little bit, even if we tell less.

Katie: [00:20:59] Yes.

Jamie: [00:21:00] It's not like just start telling less frequently. Start creating that space and people will, you know, like folks will expand into that space. And then it kind of just the space starts to grow on its own. Totally not having to kind of create all that space there, going to help drive that. And the I guess thinking about it on the continuum, it'll start to shift and you kind of get that momentum going.

Katie: [00:21:23] Absolutely. You know, I'm in that habit, too. So when you're in a facilitator mode, you're in the or you're the leader in the front of the room. We have this sort of expectation of ourselves and the people have the expectation in the room, too, that we're going to have the answers. So someone asks us a question. Okay, So I should just answer. Well, one of the things I really try and practice, even when I'm a facilitator and this can help as a manager as well and say, well, what's one thought you have about that?

Or what's one thing you've tried or one example of that? So I'm actually not answering them right away, but inviting them to share a bit more of their own thinking. And gosh darn, most more often than not, they either totally answer their question or partially answer their question themselves, because when people ask a question, they've already likely done some thinking about it.

And then it also gives us some sense of how much, what type of help I should say, not how much help, how what type of help is going to be the most helpful for them. Because coaching and developing people, as you know, isn't just always open questions.

Katie: [00:22:26] Sometimes if people are more experienced and just need the space to be challenged and to think through something as open questions are so, so helpful. But there are other times are people are like more beginner or they're truly stuck on the next step. Us just staying in open questioning actually does the opposite impact. Like it's really frustrating.

Breaking the Telling Habit with Katie Anderson | 104

So how do we then share an idea of what how you might approach a next step or step into that teaching mode of like, let's sit side by side and look at your data together, but don't assume that's the kind of help that someone needs, and then don't stay there too long. You know, say, okay, now I'm going to ask a question, How does this help you think about this problem? But we can move on this coaching continuum between teaching and open inquiry.

It's based on what the other person needs. But yes, how can you ask even just one question or two questions is sort of here where they're thinking that before you jump into the assumption that they need your answer? Yeah, I like that.

Jamie: [00:23:22] And I like to add to that too. When I when I am in this in a single conversation and I'm shifting between these roles, a lot of times I'll kind of actually verbally say what I'm doing. Right. Like, absolutely. You said, Well, let's look at this together or Well, you know, I'd like to ask you a couple of coaching questions just to kind of give them some cues. Otherwise, I think like, okay, which Jamie do I get today? You know?

Katie: [00:23:46] Well, totally. I always advocate for us to label what we're doing and why for a variety of reasons. One, it keeps people from making assumptions on our like the reason and two, it holds us honest about why why are we intentionally taking that that step? And three, it models the way it helps make the invisible visible.

So we're not only there as coaches and managers and leaders to help solve the operational problem and help them solve the operational problem. We're they're there to model better and more effective leadership behaviors. And so you have to sort of describe those to people so they understand sort of the purpose and and the decision making behind the actions that we're taking. And so it serves those those that three fold purpose.

Jamie: [00:24:35] Yes, absolutely. All right. So, Katie, we've we've talked to you've given some very specific advice and or recommendations of how we might be able to shift. We've talked about kind of intent and what what's our purpose and the conversation. We've talked about some of the different types

Breaking the Telling Habit with Katie Anderson | 104

of questions. You mentioned intention, pause. You just talked about labeling what you're doing. Right. Like, so all of this great specific feedback for for folks, anything that you think we missed on this topic.

Katie: [00:25:05] You know, I, I don't know if it's well, there are two things I want to say. First is that just to know that this is so universal and had the incredible opportunity to talk with GE, General Electric CEO Larry Culp on stage at the Association for Manufacturing Excellence about his own leadership and as an individual, as well as what he's trying to do for the organization. And I asked him the question of what was the most impactful shift in behavior he made as a leader, and he said it was learning to ask better questions and to listen with more patience. And so. This is the most important thing that you can do and to know that everyone has challenges with it.

So I think that's the first the first thing to say there. And the second is this concept around struggle. You and I talked a little bit before we started recording about this and. One of the things that I've observed about myself, as well as all the leaders around the world that I've been supporting, is. It's not that we're offering all of our ideas to intentionally take over situations or that we have mal intent or it's all about our own ego having the right answer.

I think it's genuinely about us wanting to help other people and we are uncomfortable with seeing other people struggle. And by struggle I mean not having the right answer right away or knowing the right next step or stepping in.

Katie: [00:26:31] And so our part of our habit is seeing being helpful as us rushing in with our expertise in our answers without realizing that the learning process is inherently filled with some awkwardness and struggle. And we know this. If you've learned a musical instrument or playing a sport that there's this awkward feeling and we have to let people go through that, but with the right amount of support as well.

So the second suggestion is really just to acknowledge for yourself is some of the reason you're rushing to jump in and fill that space because you're trying to be helpful. And then to understand. How much struggle is is good struggle for that person because you want you don't want them to be like literally drowning in the deep end, Like you've got to jump in and help them.

Breaking the Telling Habit with Katie Anderson | 104

But being okay with a little bit of uncertainty and someone having to do some thinking and not immediately come up with the right answer. And if we can get a little bit more comfortable with that. That struggle in our own feeling of struggle too, that it's hard to break our telling habit and to show up in a different way. We're actually going to achieve so much more together. Yeah.

Jamie: [00:27:45] Love it. So good. All right, Katie, thanks so much. This has been such a fun conversation and something that I think we probably will need to revisit. You must. Yes. You need to keep going back to this repetition of this message for sure.

Katie: [00:28:00] Yes, too. And and give some more time for some pause and for some thinking, too. So thank you for inviting me. This is one of my favorite topics. And as you were talking, it really is linked back to our very first podcast episode, which was really all about intention. So yeah. Yes. So if we can if we can be more intentional, slow down and ask a few more questions, we're going to we're going to solve so many more problems in this world.

Jamie: [00:28:27] What a great conversation. And of course, we'll put all of Katy's links in our show notes processplusresults.com/podcast. And this is episode number 104. Plus, we're also going to link to some other episodes where I talk about things that were referenced in this conversation. So some of the telling stuff, some of the asking good questions, things like that. So definitely check out the links to other episodes.

If there were some content from today that you think you want to dig into more. And in this episode, you heard a lot, right? You heard a lot here intention and purpose for the interactions, building awareness, because sometimes we're blind to our own habits and so becoming aware of what our habits are and what our actions are, you know, leading questions and closed questions and how you might reframe and ask different, better coaching questions and growing patients, being more patient, creating space for thinking, slowing down, counting to ten, using an intention. Pause. You also heard a couple of questions that Katie shared that as she's facilitating questions that she can ask back instead of immediately giving an answer.

Breaking the Telling Habit with Katie Anderson | 104

So she used the questions, Know what's one thought that you have about that or what's one thing you've thought of trying instead of just jumping straight in and giving that answer? One of the things that I heard her say that I really loved is what asking yourself, reflecting for yourself, what type of help will be most helpful for them so that you're just being more intentional about that help and then labeling what we're doing right, labeling what we're doing and why. Here's the thing I want to know for you.

Of all the things you heard today, because this is your next step, this is what you need to do, all the things that you heard today. What's one key takeaway that you are leaving with? I want you to identify it, to write it down and then share it or teach it to someone else. Because when you do that, it will help anchor your learning. Until next time.