

## Expanding What's Possible with Sarah Tilkens | 106

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:** Happy New Year. Welcome to 2023 on the Lean leadership for Ops Managers podcast. We're talking goal setting today, but specifically about expanding what you believe is possible. And here's why. So I had a great year in business in 2022. I had a lot of fun. I served some excellent clients. I gave keynotes for manufacturing companies and alliances where I was sharing the stage with well-known authors that I really admire. So, so fun to share stages with them.

I expanded my team so that we could serve more and serve better. And I had a really good revenue year. So at the beginning of the year, at the beginning of 2022, I set a revenue revenue goal on a profit goal. Like I do every single year, just like you set your goals for your outcome metrics that you want, right? And while I felt when I was setting that goal, I felt we could achieve the revenue goal, but I wasn't sure exactly how.

And if I'm completely transparent and honest. It still felt like a bit of a stretch. Like like I knew like, I know I can do it. I know I'm smart enough. I know I create enough value for that. But I didn't trust it, right? I didn't trust that it would happen. It didn't feel like it's done. Well, guess what? We met our full year revenue goal in September with three and one half months still to go. We achieved 160% of our 2022 goal.

Now, if you went back and told me a year ago when I was setting the goal that that what happened is what would happen, right. Like that. This is the amount I would have told you that I didn't believe it could happen that year, that it could definitely happen in 2023. Oh, for sure.

**Jamie:** Two years from now, yes, I'll be at that level. But to do it in 2022, I would have told you it's too fast. I don't have a path for that. I don't have a way to make that happen in 2022. Right. So why didn't I think it was possible? Because it clearly was. It happened. Right. But I didn't see it and I didn't believe it to be possible now. So how often do I constrain what's possible? How often do I limit what's possible?

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And what would happen if I leaned into possibility more if I expanded what I believed was possible? And the same for you. How much more might be possible for this world if every single one of my clients and listeners expanded what was possible for them? If you expanded what you believed to be possible for yourself. So that's why I invited today's guest to talk with us. Sarah Tompkins and I have known each other a couple of years and she joined my team just some part time, just doing some problem solving, training and coaching with some clients and love the work and the conversations that we're having. She's just fantastic. And Sarah is a business team leader for GE Health Care, and she also does her own runs, her own coaching and consulting practice.

So life leadership and lean consulting and coaching. And Sarah, I would say Sarah is a growth obsessed, lifelong learning and scientist turned lean operations manager. She's a trained problem solver who helps teams to implement systems, to visualize opportunities and solve problems. In building on our discussion with Sam last week about purpose, Sarah's purpose is to show people what is possible to be an agent of change and to transform lives. So let's dive in. Sarah, welcome to the show today.

**Sarah:** Thanks, Jamie. I'm excited to be here.

**Jamie:** Yeah. So you and I have had some conversations recently around possibility. And so we're going to dig into that topic today. But first, so that we get to know you just a little bit and understand who you are and what drives you. Why don't you share a value, a mantra, principle, quote, something that you feel really kind of embodies your beliefs about leadership?

**Sarah:** Yeah, actually, I was looking into this this morning and I found a quote from Brené Brown, and that is I define a leader as anyone who takes responsibility for finding the potential in people and processes. So that really resonated with me. I think of myself as almost like an alignment coach. I am obsessed with brainstorming and coming up with different solutions, different possibilities, and I find that I really like the responsibility in being able to do that.

So being brave enough to kind of say, I don't really know the answer, but let's play together. I think that the environment that that creates for my team, like the permission that that gives me to show up, is like

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the leader that I want to be just makes me really happy and kind of feel like I'm serving in a way that's just really true to me. So it's been.

**Jamie:** Great. Awesome. I love that. And the responsibility side and also this people side. So as you're talking about, creating a space for people is really great. All right. So, so as we were talking about possibility and kind of goals and your process around how you were thinking through establishing some goals for yourself, and we dug in really deep with that.

And this is a time of year where a lot of people are thinking about that kind of stuff, right? New Year, You know, it's something that of course we do all the time, but there's just like this extra emphasis, emphasis on it right now. So if for those folks who are thinking about like, okay, I want to set a goal or I'm doing some goal setting, what are your what are your thoughts around? Like, how do we even start? Where do we start from? What does this look like for us as we're thinking through what we want to achieve?

**Sarah:** Yeah, so there's there's a couple of different interesting things that always come up with for me with goal setting. And the one is like making sure that you can go after a goal. But really I think it's important to focus on growth as well. So you could set a goal like, Hey, I want to lose 20 pounds, or you could set a goal that looks like, you know, I want to live a healthier lifestyle. I want to be, you know, more into fitness. I want to do more outdoor activities.

So really, when you set a super finite goal, it can serve us in some ways. But if you don't reach it, it could also leave you feeling not so great about yourself. So there are ways that we can set goals that like really get us to what we want. But I just encourage people to be really curious about like, what does that goal mean to you? Why is it important? And it can be to lose 20 pounds. But if you get some of that back story kind of aligned with the goal, I think it ultimately helps us to be a lot more successful as we start marching towards it.

**Jamie:** Yeah. So if you if I say if I come in and say, okay, I've got this goal of I want to achieve X thing and it's defined, what are some questions that I'm or, or ways that I might explore that further.

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**Sarah:** I mean I would start by even just asking like, okay, so imagine a year from now you achieve that goal. What's different and what's different for you? Maybe what's different for your family, Really, What are you celebrating and what did it take to achieve that goal? So you kind of like set yourself in that space of already having been there, done that and just it's really just to generate like what comes up for you. So. Oh, interesting. Yeah, I wanted to lose that way and now I'm here. And really that weight wasn't what I was going after. I was going after something about self esteem or something about, again, fitness. So it helps you get more clarity on like is the thing that you're aiming towards really the thing that's going to create that value for you and make you feel ultimately successful.

**Jamie:** Yeah, Yeah. Okay, great. So I love this, especially because you made a comment at the beginning about, you know, sometimes if we don't maybe achieve the actual thing, it, it may not serve us as well in the sense that we feel we might feel deflated or think that we failed. But a lot of times like it's what I found is this even if it's not even about the thing almost right. Like it's because I've gone after this thing, even if I miss I had to become a different person anyways, right? Like throughout the through the process. And so that sometimes becomes even more important than whatever the thing is.

**Sarah:** Yeah, absolutely. And that's why I love, again, the phrasing of goal mindset versus growth mindset. So, you know, we're all problem solvers, but right. Like maybe my goal is 98% delivery and maybe I miss it. But in the process of aiming for it, my team got really developed and we built our capacity.

And we tried a lot of stuff and the morale is really good. So there's all of these amazing things that can happen. And if you focus too much on the goal itself, I think again, you just miss the opportunity to see all of the transformation that's taking place. Even though sometimes we fall short. But that's.

**Jamie:** Okay. Yeah. Yeah. And some of the conversations we've had is around possibility. And, you know, I know for myself as well as some clients that I was working with, we had some experience where we didn't see. We maybe were kind of constraining ourselves at the very beginning and not even recognizing what might be possible. So what do you think? Like if I if I want to step into more possibility, what are some of the things I need to be thinking about or what mindset do I need to have to to be able to do that?

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**Sarah:** Yeah, So I think that maybe that's a little bit two part question for me, because mindset I think is important in and of itself. So whenever you're going into solving a problem or just exploring something, you can take a mindset that will serve you in doing that. So I say the word explorer because oftentimes I like to encourage people to be an explorer.

So when you're going to maybe a new country or you're going to a place that you don't know, you're just going to ask questions because you're going to be super curious. So there's no like judgment or stigma associated with it. So even as we like, start exploring possibilities, it's just, you know, be an explorer in your own mind and get really curious and get rid of a lot of those negative like I can't or I'm going to look silly right from the start because that's just not going to help you through the process.

And I think once you're in, you know, an open mindset, then you can really start that genuine brainstorming and you're just going to get so much further with it. So I don't know if you've ever done like seven ways with brainstorming or if people are familiar with that concept. As I started thinking about like personal strategy and goals in my background is like lean and operations. I've done a lot of seven ways brainstorming. So when we have a problem that we're trying to solve, you know, maybe it's I need to come up with a more ergonomic solution or I need to reduce the cycle time of something.

**Sarah:** What I'll always tell the team is, okay, we're going to do a seven ways. And that activity is everyone comes to the table and you can come up with anything as crazy as you want it to be that you think might solve the problem. So if I have to move apart from position A to position B, well, I could roll it. I could create a catapult, I could create a miniature airplane, I could train a mouse. And the idea, again, is to have a tremendous amount of fun and generate ideas and know you're probably not going to train a mouse to move your parts.

But when I say that for you, it might generate something different as well. So it's lists like yes and type of idea that you're building off of. And again, it's not to have the best idea or to fix anything, it's just to expand your mind. So when you bring that back to thinking about how it applies to maybe more of a personal strategy, I like to encourage people to use kind of that same, you know, seven ways brainstorming activity. It's just don't box yourself in. You don't have to tell any about about it. Like we're not in judgment.

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Remember, we're being a curious explorer and it's just like, you know, see what comes up for you. And from that, you can create from just a really different space. And I think that's just a lot of fun. And it lands people. It lands people in a great area. Yeah.

**Jamie:** So I love this idea that you're sharing about, you know, creating more ways, right? Not getting stuck on one way like this is the one way, one path that gets me to this goal. So put this in context for us. If you have like if you were going to break it down into some steps, just give us like what the overview of what would your steps be here for kind of this process? And then we'll kind of go into some of the specific steps and bring those to life.

**Sarah:** Yeah. So I think generally the steps that I would encourage us to follow is just number one, what's the goal? So we started this conversation by just saying that, you know, the goal can be specific and measurable, the goal can be growth. So just getting really clear on what's the goal.

Step two would be maybe create some boundaries, Hey, I want to do this thing, but I can't spend a ton of money or I need it to be done in a certain amount of time. So just kind of know your own limitations. Step three would be that brainstorming process. So come up with the hundred crazy ideas and just that's the goal.

From there it would be step four. Now you've got 100 ideas, so evaluate them. Which ones do you actually like? Which ones don't you like? Toss them stuff out. And then I think from there, step five is just create a plan. So you're going to come up with maybe of those 100, now they're six that you're really in love with and okay, so what does it look like to start working on those things?

**Jamie:** So okay, awesome. So we have these five steps to your goal, kind of the boundaries, the hows. Valuating them and then creating a plan. So tell us what this looks like. What's an example of how that might work?

**Sarah:** Yeah, so I think an easy way to think of it again is in terms of weight loss, like a lot of people have weight loss goals. So let's say again, hey, I want to lose £20 in the next year. So that would be my goal

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and I would do some reflection on why is that important to me? Do I really want to lose the weight? Do I want to get healthy? So just to create buy in that this is really something that I'm willing to work for that boundaries goal. So I might say for boundaries.

Well, I'm not going to work out for 2 hours a day. I have a kid, I have a job. Like, that's not realistic. Another boundary I might set is I can't afford a personal trainer. So this has to be something like I have to do something cost effective. And I think really, like those are boundaries that you could elaborate on that, but that's the kind of gist from there. The brainstorm, you know, I think that single minded focus, that single path might say,

Well, I'm just going to run five miles every day, I'm just going to get up and I'm going to run. But again, what happens if I hurt myself? So you're not leaving your possibilities open enough to have much of a chance of being successful. So instead, maybe it's, you know, I'm going to just try to eat more salads or I'm going to get meal kits so I don't have to do meal prepping.

**Sarah:** And I get to learn more about nutrition and I'm going to join a walking group and then I'm also going to join this other group. So if that falls through and I don't like it, I've got a backup plan. So everything that just comes to mind that could lead to that healthier lifestyle that ultimately aiming for. And then again, that evaluate step is, well, I really don't want to do a walking group because I don't have time for that.

And I really don't want to do meal kits because I really hate cooking and that wouldn't be a lot of fun. So then you're kind of whittling down and oh, but what would be fun is I love making salads so I could make maybe I put it on Instagram and maybe I get people really excited about looking at my salads. And then when you land on that thing, you're going to start generating like a really positive atmosphere around it.

And I find that you naturally go into the creative plan space. So when you see all your possibilities, there will be some that just jump out as like, Oh, absolutely. Like that's the thing I have to do. And then you just start, you just start going because that excitement will just carry you right into the plan.

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**Jamie:** Yeah. Okay. So I love this because now we can all kind of visualize what this means. And I want to bring us back to your step three on Brainstorm the House, because this is where I personally get hung up sometimes. And I know that I see other people get hung up.

And I'll give you an example is like so for my business is like certain, you know, like what's the client load that I want as far as like how many clients are getting new clients or revenue levels, things like that. And so I'll have this goal, let's say a revenue level and I will get I will start to limit myself and constrain myself because I'll say, Oh, well, here's how I can get there. I can sell this many programs at this amount, which means I need this many clients, which means I need to have this many discovery calls. Oh my gosh.

Now I have to post on LinkedIn this many times and I have to speak this many times. And that's just not realistic. See, I can't achieve my goal. And because I've limited myself as to like, there's one path there when anything goes wrong and you know, you injure your leg, you can't run five miles or whatever it is, right? So when anything goes wrong off of this, then I, I think it's not achievable. And so I see people falling into that pattern when it comes to this.

And so I'd love to get your thoughts around this brainstorm the hows and how you can maybe break out of that using that step.

**Sarah:** Yeah, and I think thank you for sharing that. I think there's a lot of different options. So if you know that you get stuck in the same places, maybe this is a plan that has worked for you in years past. You know, you could brainstorm specifically what could I do when certain obstacles come up. So instead of doing the brainstorming around the how do I meet the possibility, it's like, how do I navigate certain obstacles that I know I'm going to hit, but do it gracefully and without, you know, totally falling off course.

So that could be a different way of getting yourself to a really nice place. I think another thing that I just encourage everyone to do is like sometimes just brainstorm with a friend, you know, brainstorm with a coach, brainstorm with someone else. Because we do tend to we all have the stories that we tell ourselves. But, you know, I might say, Hey, Jamie, go get on Tik tok. Like, you know, like, this is the way you've always done it before. And again, you might hate that idea, but it might take you to a different space. So just sharing it oftentimes can create more of that generative, you know, emphasis.

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And I think that can be a really fun way. And then you also have someone cheerleading you and buying in with you, which again plays into that whole belief in mindset that's going to launch you into a good start.

**Jamie:** Yeah, I love these this the generative part that you were saying there. So and I think that's where maybe maybe that's where we get hung up here is that we stop too soon with our brainstorming, right? So we like, Oh, I could do it this way or I could do it this way. And I come up with three hows how number one, how number two, how number three, and if I could just keep myself going or our listeners can keep themselves going. It's that 12th or that 15th or the 27th. How that's actually now you're saying, Oh, now I can see how possible it is because I can see so many different paths.

**Sarah:** That's exactly it. And I think it's also, you know, people have a tendency to do goal setting and strategy planning at the end of the year. And then we have all of these things that we lay out and we oftentimes don't stop to evaluate. Is this actually still the thing that I want? So this doesn't have to be a once a year process either. So, you know, we talk about quarter, we talk about experimentation, but hey, I picked these three things, these three paths and I'm going to go after. And I think that they're going to help me reach this goal.

Well, in a month. Reflect on that. Well, I was going to go again, open a tic TAC account, and I was going to try to generate new revenue there and a month from now. But do you like it? Like, is it working? Are you having fun? And if your answer is no, okay, do you want to do something else? So instead of again, like it's not a failure, you don't have to beat yourself up. It's just, hey, interesting. You learn something. Maybe you learned you don't like it, but you still learn something. So now what do you want to do with that? And then you just keep kind of building on that process and yeah, again, it just, it, it makes magic.

**Jamie:** Yes. And allowing for it to. So for all of my listeners who are disguises. Right. We love the details, you know, so I want to know the whole plan and I want to know all of the details. And so if I get but like, it doesn't work, I don't know yet. I haven't done this yet. Right. I haven't done that yet.

So I don't know what the details are going to be and allowing the space to say, okay, I don't know how exactly I've got a general strategy of here's where here's where I think we're going to go, but letting the

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kind of the universe. Figure out the hows as we as we learn and go through that process, because I just I want to know I want to have it all figured out. I don't like uncertainty. I don't like gray. Give me give me more certainty and I feel better. And so that means that like when I'm really going after goals, it's not always comfortable.

**Sarah:** But I think even being able to like, sit there and, like, realize that's that's still something. It's not comfortable, it's a little bit hard. But then how do you bring some of that playfulness to it so that something that you might not love, like maybe you can again change the process so it's not as scary or uncomfortable and you're more willing to like, sit in that space more often?

**Jamie:** Yes, for sure. And, you know, I want to bring one more thing up because as we're talking, it's coming up with a client experience I had earlier this year where and I think this just goes to the very start of it, but the VP was was struggling a little bit with kind of different line, different product lines. And he felt like it was an either or situation. Right?

Either I can achieve here or I can achieve there, but I can't achieve in both at the same time. And so I felt like it was just a trade off of which 1 a.m. I going to put more resources to? And so all of the problem solving and all of the solutions he was coming up with were related had that trade off built in automatically. And I think that was again, another way where he was kind of self constraining because he couldn't see the possibility.

And I think this goes back to the how I don't well I don't know how to do it have both have an and situation here and but if we said okay let's just say we don't know how yet. And we believe it is possible to have both. And if we believe it is possible to have both, we just haven't figured it out yet. Then how would we promise up then? What decisions would we make? And how might that be different if we just create the space and not shut it off from the very beginning?

**Sarah:** I like that. And you said it comes back to how. But like, what comes up for me is that it goes back to again the problem that you're solving. So it almost goes back that far because, you know, if I said, Hey, Jamie, when are you going to have that project done? Like, your path of thinking is going to be one way. If

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I say, Hey, Jamie, how can you have that project done by Friday, you are going to probably think about it again very differently.

So I would maybe encourage that person again, just to start with the assumption that you're going to do both. And how do you do both? Like don't don't cut it short yet. Just again, from this place of abundance, what can you create because your possibilities are going to stay so much more open and then again, you're going to whittle it down and maybe you really land at only doing one, but at least as you go through the process, you didn't sell yourself short. It was more in choice that you landed where you landed instead of.

I was afraid to look at the problem because it was too big or I was I was too nervous that I wouldn't be successful, so I didn't try. So I think if you just it's just brainstorming, there's no harm in it. And again, then where you get to, you can take more accountability for where you got to because again, it's more in choice.

**Jamie:** Yes. And you're saying and more stuff you see every time we talk, it just brings up more stuff. It's like, let me go to therapy again. Because because again, another way to shows up for me is that, you know, like, I don't want to fail in public, right? Oh, my gosh. And so that that fear of risk this came up in our conversation in the last episode with Sam was this idea of fear and and risk and kind of what how that impacts the way that we design our life or go after what we want in our lives as well. All right.

**Sarah:** I mean, just get a life coach. They're there for that. Yes.

**Jamie:** I talk.

**Sarah:** To my coach a lot about.

**Jamie:** That. I am a big believer in coaches of all types, for sure. All right. So then before we wrap up, anything that you feel like we've missed or we didn't hit on as it relates to this, that that you want to share before we kind of wrap up with our words of encouragement.

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**Sarah:** I think I'll even just like piggyback off of that fear. And one more thing. Like again, mindset is so important with all of this stuff. So even to be able, you know, if you're going to sit in a place of fearfulness when you go through this again, you're just limiting yourself. So everybody is afraid. Everybody has like anxiety around things. But again, be curious, why is fear showing up with with this problem or what can I do about this?

And I think, again, if you just lead with curiosity, like through this process, it's just going to be again, I go back to the word expansive, but like just so much more expansive. So just remember, like we always our emotions are so healthy to see and to look at, but we can always choose our perspective and how we show up for these types of activities. So just try to always do that and see where it takes you.

**Jamie:** Yes, love it. All right. So, Sarah, this is awesome. It flows so well into the conversation we just had from Sam last episode now talking to you this episode. So as we wrap up, just what words of encouragement or advice would you leave the listeners with?

**Sarah:** That's a great question. Believe in your possibilities. And when you can't go find someone who can help you see because, you know, we all have days where, you know, we get stuck and so put people in your corner, find your cheerleaders, and on the days that you're stuck, go have someone else, you know, scream for you, because that's what our people are there for.

**Jamie:** Love that so important. And it's going to help expand possibilities for all of our listeners. Thank you. You know what stands out to me in all of my conversations with Sarahh about goal setting and problem solving is how she brings about more possibility. She creates space for it, prompts for creativity and encourages learning through exploration. So whether you're doing a seven ways exercise with your team like Sarah described or saying,

Hey, let's brainstorm 100 possible hows to get there. You can expand possibilities as well. So what about you? What was one key takeaway you're leaving this podcast episode with? Process it right. Identify it, process it, write it down, and then share it or teach it to someone else so that it will help anchor your leaning, your learning. Now, I definitely recommend that you connect with Sarahh on LinkedIn. We will put

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her links in our show notes. Just how to process plus results dot com forward slash podcast. And this is episode number 106. Until next time.