

Navigating the Intangibles of Leadership with Elisabeth Swan | 108

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] Hey, ops executives and managers Jamie here and we are continuing this series. I don't know what to call it. Meet my peeps, maybe. Basically, this series I'm inviting you into conversations with people that I know and admire. Today, our guest and I are going to talk about what happens when the intangibles of leadership go wrong. Or the struggles of people leadership because you know that they happen. I'm excited to dive into this conversation with you, and I think that you will have some takeaways with it. Our guest today is Elisabeth Swan, who is an accomplished Lean Six Sigma trainer, program designer, change leader and coach with more than 25 years of experience. Elisabeth enjoys collaborating with clients and colleagues to build problem solving cultures together, and her passion is sharing what she's learned so others don't have to struggle as much. She is the co-host of the Just In Time Cafe and she also has a new book coming out that I'm really looking forward to. It's called Picture Yourself a Leader Illustrated Micro Lessons in Navigating Change. So be sure to head to our show notes <https://processplusresults.com/podcast> because we will put a link there so that you can grab this book as soon as it is released.

Now, Elisabeth and I have spent time together through some different kinds of small groups in the lean space, kind of like these peer support and development groups, if you will. And she's really one of my favorite people because she challenges me and my thinking. I love that when I leave a conversation with Elisabeth, my thinking has probably been challenged a little bit. I am probably inspired to want to dig into something more or to look at things from a different perspective. She's also really great at providing encouragement and support and she keeps us laughing. So I'm excited that you get to meet her today. So let's go ahead and dive into today's conversation. Elisabeth, welcome to the show today.

[00:02:38] Thank you, Jamie. It's great to be on your show.

[00:02:42] Well, and you have a show yourself, so you're going to have to share some of that, too. I'm so excited to have someone who has a podcast on here. You already know you can do this all day.

[00:02:54] Hopefully I will not do that to you.

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[00:02:57] Well, why don't you go ahead and tell us a little bit about the work you do and who you help solve. What problem?

[00:03:04] Wow. So work is very expansive. I think there is a lot of coaching of problem solvers these days in health care. So coaching doctors, nurses, PT's, OT'S, even all the way down to the people who do the billing, that's through UC San Diego Health. So that is exciting. I mean, I think all of us deal with health care. So the thought of having some part to play in helping patients have better outcomes is like, yes, this is a good use of lean, lean Six Sigma. So that's a big piece. I've also got individual clients. I'm either working with them on strategy, how to have a transformational roadmap. I run a leadership class with Tracy O'Rourke, and with that also we collaborate with UC San Diego, and that's again helping leaders become better at guiding problem solvers and ends with another transformational roadmap. So those are sort of big things I'm doing.

Then, of course, as you know, Tracy and I co-host the Just In Time Cafe, and that's kind of our goal is to have this hub that is just a resource for problem solvers, right? One of our beliefs is that a rising tide lifts all boats, right? So if the more that people know how to fix things, the better the world is, Right? So, yeah, that's kind of lofty, but that's what our podcast and the free webinars are all about and community. You're part of the community and it's a great one. So a lot of consulting, coaching, teaching, you name it.

[00:04:44] Yeah. And you're also you also have a book, a new book coming out and we're going to dive into that a little bit today. But go ahead, I just can't wait. So tell us a little bit about it.

[00:04:55] Yeah, that is coming out. Q1 next in probably February or March, and that is called Picture Yourself a Leader. It's kind of I guess what they say in the biz is it's a blog to book. So you've been part of this. I blogged weekly for two years during COVID, basically taking a lot of the lessons I've learned, the stories behind them, illustrating them and putting them on LinkedIn so that I was putting it out there to see How did you solve this? I ran into this. This is how I solved it. How did you solve it? So it's this collection of those lessons or it's called Illustrated Micro Lessons in Navigating Change. So that's the subtitle: Picture Yourself a Leader. It's just navigating all those intangibles and includes the wisdom of the crowd. I love the format and I'm excited to get it out there. I want to reference it. I need it in my hand so I can reference it.

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[00:05:57] Awesome. Well, we'll dig into that a little bit in this conversation today. But why don't you help us understand a little bit of who you are by sharing a value mantra, principle, quote, something of your choice, something that kind of embodies your beliefs about leadership.

[00:06:14] This is a great question and I kind of switch my quotes up sometimes based on the current challenge or where I'm focused. The one that's really resonating for me right now is "stories are just data with soul." Yeah, that one just reminds me that's how you get a connection with others. I always say another quote "Facts and data often fail to move hearts and minds." This is the antidote to that, right? That telling stories brings it together with something that people can relate to. So that is a big one for me.

[00:06:54] Oh, I love it. I love it.

[00:06:56] One of the things that I also have loved about our work together through women and Lean and different groups we've been part of is just how much you bring to the table from your background. One of the things that is in your background is performing improv. So when we think about what you were talking about navigating the intangibles and leadership so much of that is really about people and interacting with people. I was hoping we could start and if you could share a little bit about how your improv work or the lessons learned through improv work has impacted your work either with leaders or with Lean Six Sigma.

[00:07:37] That's such a good question. It has impacted so much. I did it probably over five years until my consulting schedule got too heavy to perform, but I'd say on a simple level. Improv taught me how to adapt to change very quickly. On a deeper level, it lines well on what it takes to build a good problem solving culture, because improv is problem solving on stage. It's so cool. I love thinking about this. It demands respect for people. You can't gag or use one liners, it's not stand up. It's collaborative. So we really have to listen to what people are offering and then you have to add to it. So you have to listen to it, if you're going to know how to add to it, Right, you've got to forward the plot. Think about what we do. We've got to forward the plot. There's a bias for action. Don't be a talking head is something that people say about improv. Don't stand there just expounding. So I think about the real world. Yes, don't be a talking head, work with others to create stories that captivate. So you're working together, you're trying to build this narrative. And this will resonate for you, I think mistakes are gold, right? So mistakes are gold on stage. That's where things get interesting. That's often the funniest. But I think mistakes are gold for us. Mistakes are where we learn what doesn't and does work. And it's a great way to free mistakes, that they are gold, they're a chance to learn. Bottom line, you are building stories with others in real time.

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[00:09:24] Yeah, it's interesting because I have to tell you, like, I would be terrified to be up on stage and because this is I talk a lot about how I have my podcast episodes and we invite guests over, it's like therapy or coaching for me, right? Because it's always stuff that I need to work on. One of those is that I like to have all the answers and I'm uncomfortable when I don't. I don't like to be wrong or the perception of wrong. So this idea of being on stage, having a clue what's going to happen, complete uncertainty and then to be able to react that quickly is terrifying.

[00:10:04] And that's why you need to take an improv class.

[00:10:09] And that's why you're not my Coach. Then I'd have to go take one,

[00:10:15] It's just such great training to reframe a lot of that stuff because we all have it right. It's, you know, we don't want to be called out. We want to get stuff right. It's just how much of that drives, you know.

[00:10:26] Oh, see, at some point in a few months, I'll call you and say, Hey, guess what I did? When I come back to this conversation, it's going to haunt me until I do it, I'm sure.

[00:10:36] Yes.

[00:10:37] I liked what you're saying about this idea of reframing and mistakes being gold, really listening, because you can't respond right, moving things forward, all of that really makes sense into how that then plays into the work that our listeners do in problem solving and building teams. The problem solving culture.

[00:10:59] Yeah. Yeah, absolutely.

[00:11:03] Tell me will I see some of these themes in your book, or are there any lessons learned you had through the writing process or anything?

[00:11:16] Yeah, I think improv impacted the book again on a bunch of different levels. First off, it's a collection of, I would say, most of the mistakes I've made as a leader, right? So mistakes are gold, man. And, and the lessons I've learned and then how I adapted. You've got to improvise.

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[The book] It's also full of the stories that led to those lessons. So again, you're building stories and then also it's collaborative, right? So I put those stories out to the community. I wanted to find out about everyone else's experience and what they learn on that topic. So I use social media as a stage and I did public problem solving. And so then that means I've got selections from the crowd in each chapter. Those additions right from my community and beyond. It wasn't just a problem solving community, a lot of people deal with these. Leadership is everywhere. Those additions, you know, advance the plot and gave me more insights. So it's kind of an improvised book, right? It's also full of humor. I illustrated that, I illustrated all of the stories. So the images are meant to be evocative and funny and the stories are full of humor, right? Healthy to laugh at our foibles. You know, we're all flawed human beings trying to be our best selves. And we might follow all the right steps and still see stuff fall short. So the book is really about how to navigate those moments, how to adapt and improvise.

[00:12:55] Yeah, well, and I love that you're kind of positioning some of the lessons that you've learned, but then also bringing other folks into it. So what are some of these intangibles or these moments? What are the types of issues that I would read about?

[00:13:08] So yeah. So these are the intangibles I would say are kind of like soft skill potholes that we follow to escalators since I can't wait to work. So, when Tracy O'Rourke and I wrote our first book, The Problem Solvers Toolkit, we wrote it in the style of a road trip. You use that analogy and we gave people examples of what they need, what are the basic tools they need to solve problems? And so it's how to book, we gave people roadside assistance. That was our term for giving you the instruction on using these key lean tools. Then we warned them about typical potholes that they run into, and then we gave them detours on how to get around them. We told them where to go for sightseeing if they wanted to learn more about a topic. And then what we found out, which was interesting, was the most popular aspect was the potholes and the detours. So most How-To books don't tell you how things go wrong, right? Then advise you on what to do about it. They start and stop with how to. So this book is full of these difficult intangibles that get in the way of leading change. Potholes for interpersonal skills and then detours to either avoid or kind of come around them.

[00:14:31] Yeah. All right. So give us an example of a pothole and a detour.

[00:14:36] Okay. So there is an expression that sticks with me always, "the opposite of talking isn't listening, it's waiting to talk." And everyone knows exactly what that means, right? So we are busy. We are either forming our response, we're thinking up another question or or trying to remember if we let the

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dog out, we're not really listening. People know it, they feel it and it's not a good feeling, right? So the person talking, they feel like they're not important. What they're saying isn't important to you. Over time they figure out it's not worth telling you what they're thinking because they don't feel any connection to you. So the dialog kind of dissipates. You don't hear what's going on, you don't build relationships. A lot of what I write about, there are kind of natural reasons why this happens. It's not really our fault.

[00:15:34] Okay, what happens? So we speak around 150 words a minute and then we process words at about 650 words a minute. So there's a big gap. So we fill it up. You know, there's like a big gap, and then we fill it up with our own thoughts. I learned this recently. Our own thoughts run even faster. We can think at 4000 words per minute.

[00:16:00] Oh, my gosh!

[00:16:01] So neuroscience is completely working against us. We have this ridiculous ability that doesn't help us listen to people at all. So we have to recognize how we're built and then we've got to stop our minds and truly listen. That's not easy. And like, I think about, I don't know about you, there's a lot of reasons why we do what we do when we listen to people. One of the reasons I feel this way is because my family was big, they're all storytellers and as a little kid around a dinner table, you know, it's kind of a competition to get in your story, to get in there and talk. And then, you know, you might be in the middle of something good and then one of your sisters takes the stage and diverts the attention and I'm like, Oh, dang it. I thought everyone was listening to me.

I remembered I was at a consulting firm really early on when I was low down the totem pole and the meetings with all the major consultants. I realized at one point when they were talking, they would have this kind of manufactured stutter. They all did it. And when they talked, they would say, you know, blah, blah, blah. And, and, and, and because they didn't want anyone to cut in. So we may have been trained and there's lots of reasons we do this, but you have to kind of unlearn some of these habits like conversation isn't competition and your value isn't in what you're adding to it. Not all the time. Your value is how are you really taking this person in, right?

[00:17:36] Yeah.

[00:17:38] That's hard.

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[00:17:39] It is hard. And, you know, I think it's even when we decide like, oh, I want to be better. I want to truly listen and be present when we get into our day to day that becomes difficult to do, right? It's one thing when I'm going into a one on one and I am very intentional and the door is shut and those kinds of things. But then when I'm thinking about it, like, Oh, it's in a meeting and there's 17 people in it, and then I'm walking down the hallway and somebody stops me and all of those things. My intention is. Gone. At that point.

[00:18:09] It's gone. And then there might be some other things afoot. Like there was a study I read about. They were looking at how much our meetings, I think is Chris Argyris. How much are meetings spent in advocacy versus inquiry? It's like 90%. So if you're amongst everyone going, you know, trying to forward their own ideas, it's not a place where you're encouraged to listen because you're like, Well, I'm never going to get into this conversation if I don't fight, right?

[00:18:39] Yeah, I'm just thinking about it like, Oh my goodness, I have a million examples of this just in the last month.

[00:18:48] I bet.

[00:18:50] So how do I listen better?

[00:18:54] I think one of the points is being aware of what your brain is doing. I think that awareness was a big step for me, knowing that I have that ability and that it's my job to take that ability. The other one with meetings. This was an interesting thing. I think Dorsey mentioned this. She had a client that they started capturing and maybe someone else in the meeting was capturing how many questions were asked. Right. So you can collect soft skill data like how many questions are being asked in this meeting so that it's not all advocacy and everyone sort of getting their point across. If everyone knows, oh, part of this is I've got to listen so I can know what to ask that person. But then, of course, as you know, you have to ask a question that you got to listen to the answer.

I've heard Katie Anderson does a little count to ten. Like she knows she's got that bad so she has to formally do a little countdown in her head, like, I've got to stop until I really take this in. But yeah, it's based on your own habits, But there's a few different things you can do.

[00:20:04] Yeah, I've been observing some leaders, some of my clients and leaders in those client organizations because I have a really bad habit of interrupting, and my patience is not always the

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greatest. And so I've been watching a couple of leaders who are really good at sitting back and listening and being present, or at least it feels that way as the other person. I have no idea what's happening in their head, but it sure feels that way and just kind of watching, to observe, to see, okay, wait a minute, how are they handling this? They're in the same meeting. And I am itching to say something right now. And this person is just sitting, he's just sitting there kind of calmly and making eye contact. He's looking in the direction of the speaker. He doesn't look like he's about to say something like he doesn't look like he's waiting for his turn. I'm pretty sure I always look like I'm waiting for my turn, just pause long enough because I want to say something.

[00:21:02] I got. I got, I got I got something to say. Well, what's interesting is what you took away there that struck you like you were moved by that person's attention. And I've been moved by people's attention, too. I can think about a time when I thought, wow, that person was completely listening and focused. One thing that has helped me because a lot of our meetings are online in Zoom and I've checked my face sometimes it's kind of odd. Check your face. Are you doing what that guy did? Are you focused and paying close attention to who's talking? Like? I've looked at recordings like our podcast is on video too, and I've reviewed it sometimes and thought I looked away a couple of times and I need to not do that. Like, it's instructive, I think, to just where your own eye contact is going.

[00:22:02] Yeah, and you're really speaking to self awareness, you know, kind of figuring out what you, the individual for you as a leader, which is going to be different than me, right? Every individual. And then some sort of reflection if you're going to actually get better at this.

[00:22:16] Yeah. There's techniques but yeah, there's you have to want to do it.

[00:22:25] So what do you think for our leaders out there who are listening, tell talk to us a little bit about how some of these potholes and detours that you're talking about, whether this one or a different one, how does that really show up then for a leader? Because that's really who this book is for, Right. And who your messages are for some of the leaders, Right?

[00:22:43] Yeah. The way I think about it is, you know, leaders you have, we have a lot going on. You've got to keep processes flowing, meet demand, hit your numbers, keep customers happy, report up! And the toughest part is the human terrain. And you know, like you talk about recovering from being that command and control leader because you've seen the results of that approach and you might sense that people are complying, but they don't really care about what you're asking them to do. And, you know, I

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hear new terms out there like silent quitting, but there can be even more like benign ways that people stop engaging. Right. And as success is as leaders are, success, you know, relies in large part on how we connect to people. Right. Leadership is relationships.

[00:23:41] Yes.

[00:23:41] And, you know, we've got to navigate, we've got to navigate change. Right? So you have to have a little humor, a little humility. I'll tell you a story of my own experience, a leader, kind of a leadership lesson. It's in the book. I ran a session with a client in Canada, and it was a simulation that I built, kind of a basic proof of concept for process improvement. We opened up the boxes and I have to give everyone pencils. They're supposed to do things that they can erase. And none of the pencils were sharpened. They were brand new, unsharpened pencils. I'm like, Really? So I'm in Canada. We're offsite. We're not where the client's not familiar with the building. So then we're on a hunt. And for anything, at this point, I'm like even a bunch of pens. Like I got 25 people I got to put through this. So then somebody found a sharpener anyway, delayed the whole thing about half an hour. No big deal. We got through it and it was a success.

We had a kind of a meeting, a team meeting. We did a team huddle that Monday, and the person who packed it was a relatively new employee who's also a teenager. And he was just prostrate with, I'm so sorry, it was me I put unsure of, I'm so sorry, I'll never do that again. And I said, You know what? Because I could see the whole thing like he's blaming himself. In the back of my mind I'm going to blame, not good like what I said. Can you just tell me what's on the packing list for that? Because you were just given a packing list, you know, instructions to do this, right. And he said, Yeah. And so can you just tell me what it says about pencils? And he says, Well, just pack enough pencils for the thing. I said, Does it say sharpen them? No. Let's update that and say sharpen them because I don't think we set you up for success. You know, we didn't give you the information you needed and we'll make sure it doesn't happen again.

He just had this look and he said, wow, I never would have thought about that one. It was just this revelation. I remembered, Oh, it's my job. It's my job to make sure I approach things that way. It's so easy, you know, like you were saying, I don't want to be wrong. And so if I'm not wrong, who's wrong? It might lead people to just be like, okay, let's establish you mess this up. Don't mess it up again like it's on you. We always say, be hard on the process, not on the person, but it's like then you've got to act that you've got to do that. And that's a tough one.

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[00:26:24] Yeah, I love it. All right. So, Elisabeth, I just have a couple of questions here. But before we wrap up, can you share how our listeners can connect with you? And I'm sure as soon as this book is out, they're going to want to grab it, because I know I do. I'm hearing I'm like, I can't wait to read all of these all these mistakes and lessons learned because I love learning that way. I love learning from other people like that.

[00:26:47] Yeah. And actually, I saw other research that said you learn more from other people's mistakes than your own. Your own. You're like, traumatized and someone else. You're like, Oh, okay, I'm never going to do that again.

[00:26:58] You know, that's interesting is, you know, you and I are both friends with Mark Graban and of course, he has his podcast "my favorite mistake." And but when I first met him, it was I don't even know how many years ago at this point, lots, many years ago. And I was doing my first breakout presentation at AME. So I was very, very new into lean, pretty new into like lean thinking and that kind of stuff. I structured my presentation as a road trip as well, but I did kind of a parody on like a five S thing about how, you know, jacked up we did that, right? It was so bad.

I asked Mark for permission to use one of his parody videos or part of his parody five s parody video in my presentation. That's how we started talking. He asked me about what my presentation was about. And I told him, you know, all of these wrong turns that we took on this, You know, we've taken so far on this road trip and I'm going to share all these mistakes. He's like, you know what? People don't do that enough. And because you are sharing mistakes, then I am saying, yes, you can use this. And when you write a chapter in my book and, you know, we just started connecting and building that relationship from there, but that was what it was about, was like, Oh, I'm not going to stand up and share with you all the things we did right. We're going to share, here's seven mistakes that we've made.

[00:28:12] Yeah, No, it's good you reigniting my interest because I do love that idea. And Mark's podcast is perfect. Yeah, talk about mistakes. So if people want to connect with me, it's either on LinkedIn, Elisabeth Swan and my name has an S instead of a Z. My parents got fancy. I cannot explain that. And then the website is ElisabethSwan.com. If you want to hear about when the book is going to launch, I will say I will just leave folks with just thoughts around lead with inquiry. Right? It's not new, but it helps to remember that the opposite of talking isn't listening. Right. So you use your extra time and then I would say tell stories right back to stories are data with soul, they've done brain imaging and when you tell stories, the people listening have the same parts of their brains lighting up as the storytellers. It's called neural coupling. So a listener's brain mirrors a speaker's brain when the speaker is telling a story about

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real life experience. So you can use storytelling as a way to transport people into your experiences. And that means people will care about what you're telling them and they'll remember what you said and that's why I love that quote. So my question is, would it be horrible if people were inspired to follow you? I don't think so. So that's why the intangibles are worth the time.

[00:29:38] I love it. What a great way to close this out today. Elisabeth, thank you.

[00:29:42] Absolutely. Jamie loved being here.

[00:29:48] Did you find yourself chuckling at any point today? I know I did. I definitely was laughing through this conversation and it was just so much fun. Now, one thing that I don't know if you know this about me or not, but you might want to know, is that I really value humility. This is something that's important to me. I value it. It's meaningful to me. Folks who present themselves arrogantly, like they have all the answers and they know everything, they're just not my people. It turns me off, I don't care for it, not the type of people that I want to build relationships with.

This value where I value humility really drives a lot about why I share my mistakes and challenges, that I don't just come up and say, Hey, here are all these great things that I've done, Here's all these things that I know, but I share the mistakes and not just the mistakes that I made a decade or two decades ago. I mean, don't get me wrong, I'm happy to share those, too. But I don't stand up here and present like, Hey, these are these things that I did a long time ago when I was, you know, young and inexperienced. Now I know better, so here are all the things that I'm going to tell you as an expert. I actually like to share the things that I'm still working through today. Those are the things that I still struggle with today, because I do value this idea of humility. It's important to me now.

I am so thrilled that this conversation went that way. I didn't actually even know that's where it was going to go. So it was really fun to me to hear Elisabeth talk about learning from these leadership potholes. Right. Normalizing this idea that you can talk about the potholes and the detours, the challenges and the mistakes and the lessons learned. If we can normalize this, you can do it more as well. And when you do this more, even when you're talking with your team saying, hey, I could really use your help, I'm working on this. I'm trying to get better at this. Hey, I had a situation that I didn't handle very well. And so I want to kind of just reflect on that with you and share share some of my lessons learned that if you do this more, you're also going to create a space that your team can do it as well and you're going to model it for them so that they can feel comfortable and everyone will learn better that way.

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[00:32:08] So really, really cool to just hear some of this from Elisabeth and hear the framing of the way that she presented this. I know there was a lot of really great stuff shared about stories and the power of stories and improvising and, you know, the opposite of talking. Is it listening? Is it waiting to talk? So lots to choose from today.

I want to hear from you. What one key takeaway are you leaving with today? I encourage you to write it down and then share it or teach it to someone else so you can process it and better anchor that learning. And if you can add an element of processing it for yourself, what is the. How does it apply to you? That will take it a step further as well.

Now, in our next episode, we're going to dig a little deeper into this whole people leadership focus, you know, the whole human side leadership. So stay tuned for that and I will catch you there in our next episode.

