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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] Jamie here and I want to talk about execution. And that's right. It's a topic that's been on my mind because I've had some clients and some listeners reach out and in conversation or communication share opportunities with their teams gaps in execution.

So I've kind of been putting a little extra effort in, watching, listening, asking, prompting, trying to understand the current state, what's happening, why are some individuals or some teams struggling with follow through, struggling to do what they say they'll do, struggling to hit deadlines, struggling to stay on task with the important things? So over the next few episodes, I want to share with you what I've seen as some enemies to effective execution.

Now, these aren't necessarily the only enemies, but they are some that I've seen pop up repeatedly, and so I thought it'd be worth talking about them. I'm not putting them in any sort of hierarchical order or qualifying them in any way, just based off of my observations and kind of some of the research I've been looking at in real life.

When I say research, I mean real life research, looking at real organizations and real operations leaders. And so that's what I want to do. And today we're going to dive into one specifically. Are you ready? All right, let's go. So today we're talking about distraction. Distraction as an enemy to execution. And I know this is a hard one because you are dealing with competing priorities. Your to do list or your personal Kanban queue is never done.

[00:01:58] There is always more to do than time to do it and it's probably not uncommon for you to have to choose between activities scheduled for the same time. I get it. The thing is though, that execution, effective execution, takes focus. That is, executing on important things means focusing on important things. And what I see and what I've been noticing is operations leaders getting distracted by all the things, the inevitable stuff, most of which has some level of urgency.

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I have to deal with this problem so that we can get the customer order out the door. I have to find this thing or this answer so that my team can keep working. I have to address this conflict so it doesn't disrupt the entire week. A lot of these things, they have to be done. You can't ignore them. You can't always delay them. And sometimes you may not be able to delegate them or at least you can't delegate them right now, the moment when you most need to. This is a problem, though, when you don't force the focus on important.

So you have probably heard of the idea of like the one thing or you've heard the phrase, you know, priority is singular, or what's your one wildly important goal, your one wig, wildly important goal. Or maybe in planning, what's your when you're planning your week, what are your top three tasks for the week? Right. Or your top three tasks for the day? Well, I'm going to be transparent here and tell you that this baffled me for freaking ever.

[00:03:38] Like I did not get it. I remember a few years ago I had hired an accountability coach and every week I would email her my top three for the week and at the end of the week I would email her the status of those with any reflections or learnings. So it's kind of this idea of building accountability to someone else. Now, that's how it was supposed to work, but I didn't get it right. And so I had been tracking my activity and I was doing, you know, 18 to 23 planned tasks per day, right?

Like every day I was I was tackling I was, you know, putting off my on my to do list 18 to 23 things that I would cross off. And I'm not talking about those things that are reactionary that you respond to in the day. I'm saying, you know, this is what I'm planning and I'm getting 18 to 23 of them done, and that's 100 in a week. And you accountability coach, want me to tell you what my top three are you crazy? So I broke her rules and I would send her a list of 8 or 12. My real list would have like, here's my top 30 for the week. These 30 things have to do get done. And then I would narrow it to the most important, the top 8 or 12. So hold on to that.

[00:04:46] We're going to come back to that in just a minute. But for this conversation, what I want to tell you is that I want to acknowledge that you do a lot and you do important stuff. I am not downplaying any of it. I don't think you're just sitting around doing a bunch of unimportant things or non-urgent things because you know you're just wasting time and I'm not coming in and telling you to do less, or that you

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just need to learn to say no.

What I do want to do is simply share with you some things that I've learned. And what what helps me and I say helps because this is an ongoing work for me. Right. It continues to help me. All right. Back to accountability, Coach. So when I would send my accountability coach my list of 8 or 12 things that I considered my top ones for the week, they are what I thought were super important. Like if I had to, if I had to put them in numerical order, what's most important or what must get done this week? These are my must do's, right? So that client deliverable, it's most important.

It's like, gosh, this is super important. Or the keynote that I'm delivering that I need to finish slides for super important and has a deadline or the tax stuff for the accountant that I may not really care about, except that, you know, there's a deadline and I kind of have to do it from a compliance standpoint.

[00:06:04] Right. And it has to be done this week. So those would make the cut in my top 8 or 12. But doing this for months. Right. And going through this process. And here's what I learned. Okay. So I learned that I was going to do the client deliverable work regardless of whether I listed it or not.

So regardless of whether it made the cut of the top three or the top eight or whatever, I was going to do it because it was really important to my client and to my income. So if I didn't put that on my list for the week, I still did it right? I still did it that week and I was going to do the time sensitive, urgent deadline work, regardless of whether it was a top three or top eight or top 12 or not. Because if I missed that deadline, there were like negative consequences.

So even if I didn't put that tax compliance thing on my top 12, I would do it anyways because the deadline was Thursday and I also learned that I was going to do some of that instant gratification stuff regardless of whether it was listed. Because let's tell the truth, I'm a sucker for dopamine, too. You know what wasn't going to get done, though, if it wasn't listed. The proactive strategic priority that was really important but was for the long game. You know, the payoff wasn't going to show up until later.

[00:07:34] There wouldn't be an immediate pain if I didn't get it done this week. And so it was easier to kick that can down the road. And then three weeks later and then three months later and then six months

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later, I'm not closer to the priority that I said was strategic.

That I said was this most important current challenge that we're trying to tackle. That's what I figured out. After months of working with an accountability coach, which led me to this. I think it is helpful to separate the way you think about what you need to do to run the business versus what you need to do for that strategic priority. Important thing that you need to do. Right. So I want you to think about it differently.

This is the part that I was missing, and maybe it was just me that was missing it. Maybe everybody else got it. And I was the crazy one who didn't understand because I was treating them all the same. I was treating the stuff that was important for strategic priority and the stuff that was important because my client wanted it and it had a tax compliance. Whatever I was, I had them in one big blob as far as I was thinking. So when I said top three, I'm like, how in the world could I say that this one is more important than that one? Right. All right. So let's go back I want to give you an example to tell you how how this shows up or how it showed up for me in an example.

[00:08:52] So if we go back 18 months ago, I was at a major decision point in my business to figure out how to say yes to helping more clients and and helping my existing clients go deeper. Because what was happening is that folks were asking me for things beyond what my solo consulting practice self could deliver.

So I knew I did not want to build like a big consulting firm or, you know, a consulting practice that was never been an interest of mine. But I also didn't love the idea of constraining possibility and saying no to clients. Right? Like, I don't know, maybe I want to do more. And so I was at this decision point, this inflection point, because saying yes was really intriguing. Right. But it meant adapting my practice model and it was a big undertaking.

So this became a strategic priority because in order to do this, this isn't just like, hey, here's this, here's the 12 things and I just check one, two, three, four, five, Like this is a change. This is a change in the model of how I'm working with clients right now. And it's going to take a lot to move it from idea to reality. And if I'm not intentional about it, it's not going to happen. But I decided it became a strategic priority because I wanted to do this expansion, this, you know, explore this expansion possibility.

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[00:10:05] Now, at the same time that I wanted to explore this expansion possibility and do this thing that was going to take a lot of work. I was already really busy. I was at full capacity. I didn't have extra time. So I had multiple clients, all with deliverables plus all the stuff that goes into running a consulting practice, marketing, sales, finance, compliance, administrative, all the things. And I could keep myself plenty busy and never once take a single step toward the strategic priority of expansion.

But the expansion wasn't going to happen on its own if I didn't focus on it right. If I just kept waiting until things were less chaotic, when I had more time, it would never happen. So. The way this would work before is my top important things is all of the things that needed to get done. Like and I say all the things. Let's say the next three things that need to get done.

What are the three next steps that I need to take this week in order to move? The strategic priority of expansion forward would be in the same jumbled blob of the 72 things that need to get done for me to serve my current clients and to create invoices and to do my marketing or to have this sales call or whatever else. Right? So when I thought about them all together, then. Then I couldn't think about it. I couldn't prioritize. I couldn't focus.

[00:11:32] I would get distracted by all the 72 things. But when I separated them, right, when I separated the way I thought about them, then it was better because now I knew these three next steps that I need to keep front and center to focus on in order to do my strategic priority.

So this is what happens for execution in operations. That strategic priority, that critical performance area, that people development, that continuous improvement, that thing that won't get done if we don't focus on it. It gets buried under all the run the business stuff. So I want you to separate out and think differently about your strategic priority. Right.

So what is it right now? What's the strategic priority right now for you? It's going to change, right? Like it's not the same thing forever. But just think about the next three months. What's your strategic priority, your wildly important goal, your critically important thing? Maybe your operation is struggling with quality, and that's causing a ripple effect across the business. And you can't solve your sales growth or your people

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development or your continuous flow improvement challenges.

If your team lives in the chaos of quality defects and rework. And so maybe that is your strategic priority that you need to separate out and think differently and focus on that. You do not allow for the everyday urgent items to distract you from this priority. Or maybe your strategic priority is people development for succession planning. You look out and you know that 3 to 5 years from now you're going to be in trouble because you have folks retiring or you can see gaps in competencies and capabilities and have a risk if someone resigns or is promoted.

[00:13:16] And so that's something that you have to tackle, but it's not going to get done if you don't focus on it. And so you've got maybe that's what you need to focus on and not allow that run the business stuff to distract you from. Or maybe your strategic priority is revenue growth or maybe it's profitability improvement or a new product launch or site expansions, right?

Whatever it is, do not let the customer orders that you have to get out today or the people conversations you need to have or the reports that you have to submit or the run, the business meetings and activities that you have distract you from your strategic priority. And I'm not saying that you just have to just do more or to not do the run the business stuff. You still have to do the run the business stuff.

We're just going to kind of separate it in our brain and think about it to make sure that that strategic priority stays a priority. Right? And that you're not distracted by run the business. So there are two best ways. I don't know if there are best ways, but two ways to do that are, number one, you separate out. This is what we've been talking about.

[00:14:21] Separate out the strategic priority activities and the run the business activities. Allow your brain to treat them differently. Don't let them get jumbled up all together. That way you can keep a focus on the ones that are specifically going to move you forward on the strategic priority. And the second way that you can prevent this distraction is to create routines that enable you to keep strategic priorities moving forward.

Maybe it's a weekly meeting with the group that most executes on this priority. Maybe it's a daily habit of

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spending 25 minutes every day taking action on the priority like some sort of cadence. This is, by the way, is where Leader standard work if you go back to all those episodes that we just had on Leader standard work, this is where this can be really helpful. But you want a cadence because it does two things. First, it creates an avenue for activity.

When you have a cadence that is planned and you don't have to rely on yourself, creating the time and space for the meeting or for the working session or for the activity, because it's already created. It's already blocked out. Then action happens. Movement forward happens, right? You're not having to find the time to get in front of the people. You already have it there. And so that's the first thing the cadence does, is it creates the avenue for activity. The second thing that it does is it creates accountability. Because this cadence exists now, whether it's self-accountability for yourself or it's accountability for others.

[00:16:03] Others are now accountable because they have this cadence by which they are reporting out their activity. Right. And it's not just necessarily a report out. It might be whatever kind of format it is, but, you know, you have to move this forward.

I remember watching this play out one time with this trap of distraction, this distraction trap. It was a leader that was an ops leader manager that I was working with. And, you know, really good leader leads people well, manages conflict well. He's in a really hard job. There was this kind of new product launch type of situation. He's asking to be asked to lead and and manage this situation and this operation that had a ton of stuff that needed to be done right.

There's no standard work in place like we're learning. You know, he's learned he had to learn everything from scratch, all of that kind of stuff. So I wasn't envious of the position he was in. It was a hard role for sure. And there was a lot to do and a lot of people had to do a lot of things in order to pull this off. But when I was watching him, you know, he really, in my opinion, Right. This is my opinion kind of being watching this unfold a little bit. But I thought that he really needed to create a cadence of meetings. There were two meetings in particular.

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[00:17:18] Right. Or one meeting with two different groups. Right. He needed to have two different meetings that I thought were going to be critical because when I thought about it, these two meetings, having a cadence every week with these these folks, with these two groups would build the avenue by which to move the project forward on the most important things and keep everyone focused on the most important things, right?

So it would create this avenue that would already exist and it would create accountability so that everything wouldn't fall on the manager's shoulders. Because what was happening is, you know, you couldn't get a meeting scheduled ad hoc. It was just too hard. You know, something always came up. Something always came up. So those avenues were having to be created every time something needed to be handled. But if you had this standing avenue, this this cadence in place, I really thought that would help.

And then the accountability, if everything's fallen on the manager's shoulders, right, we've got this bottleneck. And I really thought having this cadence would allow other people to take ownership and initiative and be accountable to taking responsibility for different things so that we could spread that responsibility around. But because this leader, this operations leader, he was he was kind of falling into this distraction trap and he was getting distracted with all the things right. And so he didn't set up this cadence right. So week after week after week would go by and he wasn't scheduling it.

[00:18:46] He wasn't getting this cadence on the calendar. And, you know, and I remember kind of as I'm was watching this, you know, it wasn't because like, oh, I just don't care. Like there's there's really important stuff going on, right? This is if we don't do these things right, he had to do these things to get work out the door. Customers will we will fail customers. Right. But because he was letting that distract him from doing that one thing of getting the cadence on the calendar right, get it on the calendar, then, you know, you look up and three weeks goes by.

Now, six weeks goes by not having the avenue and not having that accountability set in place. And so what happens if you're not careful, if you allow this distraction to happen and you don't stay focused, then that's exactly what happens. And you look up and now it's been three months and now it's been six months and you've lost all that time and you can't go back in time and do it differently.

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That time is now gone. And if your strategic priority has deadlines or timelines or if your business is seasonal or if there are dependencies in that work, you might find that you missed out on the best possible time to do that work, right? So think about like a business that's seasonal, like FedEx, where if you don't get this improvement work done before peak holiday season, you can't do it during peak holiday season.

[00:20:05] And so now it waits until the next year. And so this is how this can sneak up. If you get distracted and you lose this focus. And so where this cadence can become so helpful, particularly if when you're when you're this busy. Right, when you're like, oh my gosh, we're just so busy is being disciplined and using that cadence to help you be disciplined and to help you get help. And so that's just an example of how this can play out.

So one of the enemies that effective execution is distraction. So distraction doesn't mean you're being distracted by things that don't matter, right? It's still stuff that matters. It's still important stuff. The business cannot run without doing those things. But we still have to make sure we don't allow the running the business to prevent us or to distract us from the strategic priority.

We've got to do both. So to help combat distraction, you want to separate out like identify, define what is that strategic priority, differentiate between the actions and the routines that will progress your strategic priority forward versus all the other run the business stuff. Even though that run the business stuff is super important, right? We're not saying it's not important just because it's not. Strategic priority.

And then you also want to make sure you establish those routines, that cadence of activities for the strategic priority that can help create the avenues for forward action and can build in accountability.

[00:21:28] So as you think about this for you, here's what I want you to ask yourself first. What is your strategic priority right now for this quarter? Right. So think about the next three months. What is it? How will you separate out what is needed?

What are your next steps are for the strategic priority from the other stuff? How do you make sure it

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doesn't get buried in the pile of 72 things? And what actions or what cadence will create avenues and accountability for your strategic priority?

So think about those three things for how you can combat distraction so that it doesn't become an enemy of effective execution for you. All right. Now, as always, you can find the show notes for this episode and other episodes at [processplusresults.com/podcast](http://processplusresults.com/podcast).

Stay tuned for future episodes because we're going to continue exploring topics around effective execution because we've got to lead people right And we've got to build these great workplaces and build workplaces where we honor, respect people and people love to come to work and they recommend it, right? We got to do all that from a people leadership standpoint and also run the business and also improve the business.

And that's something that we have to get better at from an execution standpoint. We have to be able to execute effectively in order to do that. People leadership Operations leadership is not just about how do I lead people, it's also how do I lead people to effectively execute. So stay tuned as we continue these conversations.