

Great as an Enemy to Good in Operations Leadership and Execution | 116

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.

[00:00:28] Hey ops executives and leaders. I am Jamie and I am happy to invite you in to an ongoing discussion about enemies to effective execution. We've talked about to enemies to effective execution on the last couple of episodes. The first enemy we discussed is distraction. Getting distracted by the chaos or the general run the business stuff and losing sight of the important strategic priority on which you need to execute. The second enemy we discussed is complexity. Complexity makes it hard for people to follow through.

If you want people to do something, whether that's yourself or your team, then make it simple. Now you can hear both of those episodes, number 114 and number 115 and get the show notes, the transcripts and the links at our website process plus results. Dot com forward slash podcast. Today we are talking about a third enemy to effective execution, and that is perfection. Now, perfection can show up in a couple of different ways.

One is it that is that it may stall decision making. So as you're searching for more information and more information and more information to build your confidence in the decision. The other is it can stall action as you wait until you have all the details of the plan or the program or the resource or the deliverable or the action ironed out. And it's perfect and everything is perfect and spot on. So we'll talk a little bit about these. But I want to start with a confession.

[00:01:59] Now listen up. I am a Virgo in my DiSC profile. I am a CD. And in some areas of my life, perfectionism is an obstacle that I have to watch out for and manage. Now, it's certainly not all right. There are some things I don't really care about that much. And perfectionism isn't even a thing doesn't even come close to entering the picture. But when I think about achievement through school and work in particular, it is there.

I was a straight-A student, salutatorian in my high school class, valedictorian of my college class, quickly promoted through the ranks in my career, and it hits me there. Now, the good news is that I am very

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aware of it, and a lot of times I manage it pretty well. But it does still sneak in sometimes and I can still fall into this trap.

So if you hear yourself in any of the discussions or examples, it's okay. We're not judging, right? I have been there. I have done this myself. Right. So what we're doing is not judging. We're discussing openly our obstacles and we're making problems visible so that we can get better. And if you're an ops executive or leader and this isn't really a problem for you personally, like I'm not sure that I get it. I would never do that. You may want to still tune in because I bet that someone on your team experiences this. All right, let's dive in.

[00:03:14] As I mentioned, I'm a high sea hide. And high seas are those folks who want all the information to make a decision. I research all the things I know all the options, and either like, you love me for it or you hate me for it. My family loves this side of me when it comes to vacations because I've researched all the things. I've grouped activities together geographically. I've looked up what is open or closed on what days to make sure, you know, we don't plan for something and realize later it's closed that day. Oh, but now it's too late because it's, you know, whatever it is, right?

So my family, they just have to show up and they know that all of the little details are taken care of. And I do it because I want the vacation to be perfect. And they love it, at least in, you know, that vacation scenario. But it takes time to do this. It takes time to do all that research. And that's why this can be a problem for your operations leaders, because if I need to wait until I have more information to make a decision to have quote unquote air quotes here, enough information to make the perfect decision, then the decision is delayed.

And what we need to keep in mind is that decisions have varying degrees of consequences, big decisions and little decisions, big impact and little impact. And that means we can use high levels of discernment on those mission critical decisions, but we can let it go on the small impact decisions.

[00:04:34] So here are some quick questions that you can ask yourself or dialog with your leader about. When we get stuck not making a decision because we don't yet know enough or know how to make that perfect decision. Ready? All right, here we go. Here are some questions you can consider.

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How right does the decision need to be? What's the impact if we make the wrong decision? What confidence level on a scale of 0% to 100% are you at right now on your decision? What confidence level? 0% to 100%. Right. 50%. 70%? 90%. What confidence level are you at right now on your decision? And what if that confidence level were good enough? What if in this situation that confidence level were good enough? So you can write those down or you can go to our show notes later on and pull those questions out and be able to reflect back on those.

Now, when it comes to enemies of execution, decision making is only one area where perfection comes into play. The other is in the action phase. I want to share a couple of examples. Years ago, a long time ago, I was working with an operations team that had decided to put some hour by hour types of visual boards in production to help the team know expected versus actual. And they weren't exactly hour by hour boards.

[00:05:48] Their business was different. But just think of something like that, right? And you have your target for each time segment and then your actual and then your reasons why your notes on the far right side of what got in the way. And so these would be written on with dry erase marker every day. And the operations manager, the plant manager was swamped.

And so he went to his support partner and asked for help. Right. Could the support partner find some boards and tape off the sections and do all the things to get them up? Now, I was a little confused because it's been a few days, right? And I was maybe a little bit more commanding and controlling, but it's been a few days and the decision had been made to put these boards up. They already decided what they would look like. Everything was known.

We had all the information. And this is a failing plant like the plant was struggling. Action is needed quickly, Right. This was a specific targeted action and decision. And it's still not up. Right? Like three days. It's been three days. How is this not up? So the manager was like, well, yeah, but we don't have enough boards. And the boards we have are old and raggedy and messy and won't really work. They're not in stock at the local store. They're going to take more than a week to come in, yada, yada, yada.

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[00:06:52] Right? So we started engaging. So what else can you do? What else could you do now? What could you do in the short term? What could you start with? How could you find some find a solution? And it was really interesting because the manager was struggling to allow for a less than perfect solution. Like he had a vision of what he wanted in his head, right? This is what he wanted. He had the vision in his head and he couldn't get that up because of these obstacles, right?

Like he couldn't get that exact vision to happen. And so now there were delays and this execution stalled. So where do we compromise? Where we ended up compromising? And he didn't love it, but he compromised was for him to at least allow for an imperfect solution right now. So he was going to go ahead and find the boards and wait for them to come in and tape them up and do all the things right.

He was still going to do it his way, but he agreed to the compromise in order to at least get us started with the visual management plan that they wanted to do. So we put flipchart paper up and drew out the outline of like the goal target actual reasons why, but we didn't want to replace flipchart paper every single day, right? Because we now have this flipchart paper and all the operations and replacing flipchart paper and redrawing all the lines every day would get old.

[00:08:09] So we use Post-it notes, we color coded them. Blue Post-it notes are the target, pink and green Post-it notes for actual. It was up and running same day and you know, whatever within a week. It's all habits. And what was interesting is that the the plant ended up using that system for the entire rest of high season. Right.

Their season, their high season. So for the next four months, that imperfect solution that was not good enough originally for the manager. It worked. It wasn't perfect. It had issues, but it worked well enough that the manager decided to not even spend the \$600 to buy the new boards that year. And you know what's interesting, by the way, is that I have since used that method like, hey, Post-it note or a flip chart with Post-it notes. Right?

I've used that multiple times since then because it's a great way to get started without having to have the perfect answer yet. Right? So similarly, I have a different situation with a different manager. Very similar in that, you know, the production line is struggling and some actions had been identified to solve specific

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problems causing the performance gaps. And one of the actions, you know, this was just like an action step to get there. Right? But one of the actions is that team members needed to track some individual data each day and turn that in so that that data could be used for some decision making and other purposes, and also so that the individuals could track their progress to goal throughout the day.

[00:09:34] Right. So the manager was struggling to get these sheets executed. Right? Days were going by and at first they're just not in place at all. Like, okay, so what's what's happening? What's preventing you from getting these into place? And the manager was still tweaking them, right? Making an adjustment here, making an adjustment there.

And then it was struggling to get them out every day because the sheets and the way that this manager wanted to do the sheets in Excel was updating them each day with individual specific targets and names and then printing them out and handing them out. But sometimes the manager couldn't get to that task and so the sheets weren't ready in the morning or they would get printed out without the change and have the wrong information on it because it hadn't been updated.

And it was a burden. And it was so interesting to watch because this manager had so many things he needed to work on and I would watch him struggle spending time on this activity and trying to do this thing that really. Was a like a low impact thing. I mean, yes, it had to get done, but the details of the way he was doing it was low impact. It didn't have to be done that way.

[00:10:35] And so so he was falling into really two of the enemies execution track traps. Right? So the first one he was falling into was complexity. It was this complex system of updating it every day and individual targets and putting them out. But that complexity isn't just because he wanted a complex solution. It was driven at its core by perfection. Right?

This manager wants things to be right. He wants them to be right. And so when we talked about other options of how it could be done with less burden and better execution, the manager was kind of resistant because he wanted it to be perfect. He wanted the sheets to have the data and for Excel to do the calculation. He wanted to make sure that the team member and Operation one had a sheet that was designed specifically for Operation One, and that was a little different than Operation two, and it was all

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coming from good intentions. He wanted to be helpful.

He wanted to make it easier for them. But this drive for perfection was holding him back. It was preventing effective and timely execution and it was creating more burden for him. And so in this case, we actually engaged the team leads into the conversation. And so we presented the problem like, hey, we're having this problem with these sheets getting updated. And yes, we could have put in the responsibility, say team leads to go do this action.

[00:11:51] But instead we just took this problem to them and the team leads one of the team leads, suggested that why don't we just print out generic forms, laminate them, and then we'll write in. We. Team leads will write in the names and the goals and stuff. And then once the data is captured, at the end of the day, we can erase them, prepare them for next day. And so now we've got the team lead saying, Can we, can we please try this way?

Let's just try it this way. So the manager allowed it, right? He's not satisfied with imperfect solution. If he had it his way, he would still, you know, he would figure out a way to solve this problem and do it the way he wants to do it. But he's ready to let the team leads try it their way. And so we printed and laminated the sheets and it was less than perfect, but it worked. And they used that and it gave the team leads autonomy to own their lines and reduce their dependency on the manager.

You know, here's the thing. In both of these situations, both of the managers are good managers. They're good leaders. I'd be happy to have them on my team. But they just got trapped by perfection as an enemy to execution. Right. And it happens. It happens to me. It happens to managers in our in our operations in both of these situations. They needed to act with urgency.

[00:13:01] But the action wasn't happening. They were getting tripped up. It was getting too late. And if you're the ops executive and you're not in it with them, what you see is managers that can't execute, managers that say they're going to do something and then days go by or weeks go by and it's not done. And you think, Golly, we sure have an execution problem.

But as you dig in, though, there are different factors that contribute to our execution problems. We've

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talked about distraction, we've talked about complexity, and now we've talked about perfection. So I want to give you some areas of thinking or conversation that can help you if you've fallen into one of these execution traps, particularly as we talk about perfection. So whether it's you because you've fallen into this trap or you're struggling with execution, or if you've got an operations leader on your team who's struggling, this might be some topics of conversation that you want to engage in, particularly as it relates to perfection.

And that's number one, Iteration Number two, good enough or good enough to start. And number three, a bias for action. Now, before we talk about these, I just want to call out that there is a whole flip side to these, right? Like, yes, you need to plan in advance. You need to consider alternatives. You need to engage people to be involved. So we're not taking these too far. We're not taking these to an extreme.

[00:14:21] There are some people who are on like the entire flip side of like doing this stuff too much and it becomes a weakness for them. But for folks struggling with perfection, these might be relevant areas to explore. First, iteration operation leaders have to get comfortable with iterating in action versus only iterating in concept.

I have seen leaders get stuck so many times before because they're trying to iterate in their head to get to perfect or close to perfect solution before they execute, before they implement, before they take action. And the truth is that iteration has to happen in the action, in the execution, in the implementation, and you have to be comfortable with that. Yes, you're going to have a version two and a version three and a version four.

So that's first iteration. Second, good enough and specifically good enough to start because, well, iteration. You may have to let go of perfection and allow this to be good enough to start. Because if you don't, then you may never get started or you get started way too late. So what is good enough to start? And third, a bias for action. This is moving from thinking to doing. This is not just talking about what could be done, but making it happen. Not just making the decision, but acting on the decision. In our two examples from today, this is once the manager allowed for the less than perfect solution that we had a bias for action and made it happen immediately.

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[00:15:49] The flip charts were made, the sheets were printed and laminated same day. So think about this, considering the objective, the impact and the urgency in this situation, what is good enough for the first iteration? How can we get started with a good enough first version today?

Now, as I mentioned, you can take these ideas of iteration good enough and bias for action too far. So for our high D's and high I's on the DiSC profile or the folks who have a history of shooting from the hip, as they say, we don't abandon planning in the name of iteration. We don't settle for less in the name of good enough and we don't become reckless in the name of bias for action. It's balanced, but these are great places to engage in reflection and dialog. When we, as an executive might say, have an execution problem.

Iteration good enough to start and bias for action. All right. How about for you? What resonates for you in our discussion today? What's one thing that you're going to take away and share with someone else? Because remember, sharing with others and engaging with others will help you process and submit your learning better than just living it in your own head. All right. That's it for now. Don't forget, you can check out the previous Enemies execution episodes at process plus results. Dot com forward slash podcast. Until next time.