

GA 009 | Joel Gross

Ron Pereira: You're listening to episode nine with Joel Gross.

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Announcer: Welcome to the Gemba Academy Podcast, the show that's focused on helping individuals and companies achieve breakthrough results using the same continuous improvement principles leveraged by companies such as Toyota, Del Monte, and the US Department of Defense. Now, here's your host, Ron Pereira.

Ron Pereira: Hey, there. Welcome to another edition of the Gemba Academy podcast. First of all, thank you so much for taking time out of your day to listen to what we're up to. We just finished an interview with a gentleman named Joel Gross. It's probably one of my favorite interviews that I've done so far.

I stumbled across Joel's blog, and we'll talk about that in the episode. It's called theKaizone.com. It was very well-written, and I really enjoyed reading his articles, so I approached him to see if he wanted to do a podcast. It ends up, he's a long-time listener of the show and whatnot. Anyhow, we did it.

We were brainstorming a couple different topics to do. One of the topics that Joel was pretty passionate about was how he has been applying these lean-thinking, continuous improvement principles in his home. I have a big family, and I also try to -- my wife would maybe not agree -- practice some lean-thinking principles as much as possible in our house and with our children.

I was really fascinated with what Joel was up to. That's really what we talk about in this interview, how he's applying lean principles with his wife, and they actually homeschool their children, and how they go about everything from their pantry to the mission statement, if you will, of their family, and their true north as a family. I think that you're really going to enjoy it.

Even if you don't have kids, I still think you're going to find value. Perhaps you have a niece or a nephew or something like that, that you're trying to influence in a positive way. Joel has tons of enthusiasm and passion, and I'm really excited to get this episode out there.

All the show notes -- and actually, Joel talks a lot about some very specific things in his house, so he's promised to send pictures -- we're going to have all those linked up in the show notes over at gembapodcast.com/09. Enough from me. Let's get to the show.

Joel, thank you so much for taking time to visit with us today.

Joel Gross: Thanks for being here, Ron.

Ron: Where are you calling us from today, Joel?

Joel: I am in the tropical beaches of eastern Pennsylvania right now. [laughs]

Ron: What's the temperature these days?

Joel: Not as hot as I'd like it to be. I think we're hitting 60s, maybe getting into some 70s.

Ron: That's not too bad. I was getting my hair cut last night, and a young lady was telling me about her mom, who's in Colorado, and they got snow and all this. We're here in Texas.

Joel: No, thanks.

Ron: Why don't you just start by telling us a little bit about yourself and your background and really, how did you first come to learn about continuous improvement?

Joel: If we start at the beginning, most of my continuous improvement career, the theme is serendipity. I was in the right place at the right time. Continuous improvement may not have been what I was looking for, but it found me, one way or the other. Actually, I had my first exposure to continuous improvement when I was a freshman undergrad, studying chemical engineering at Lafayette College.

My professor and I were talking about career development, and what did I want to do? He just happened to be a master black-belt in Lean Six Sigma. He gave me my initial exposure, talked me through what it's about, what are the career opportunities for it, and then hooked me up with a local business that was looking for some Six Sigma project help, and mentored me through my first project, as an intern, after my freshman year.

After that, I was basically hooked and tried to steer my career towards that. I was fortunate that I got into Merck for my first job at about the same time that they were starting up their Lean Six Sigma program within their manufacturing space. I was able to convince one of the most influential leaders in the area to take a chance on a young guy, a young engineer.

He got me in on the ground floor of the program, and I spent my first seven or eight years in the industry helping to deploy and really mature the Lean Six Sigma program at Merck. Starting off more on the Six Sigma side, and then having the good fortune again to transition more into the Lean space, and get to practice alongside some great coaches and mentors with some real first-hand Toyota experience.

That's what really took my understanding and my knowledge of Lean, specifically, to the next level and really fueled the fire that I have today. Eventually, my time at Merck, I elected to come to an end, in order to pursue some different experiences.

I ended up with another major company in the pharmaceutical world, but this time, starting a Lean program from scratch. Outside of manufacturing, we're actually, just right now, gearing up to deploy the new Lean program within their global shared service division and looking to get some experience outside of just the manufacturing realm.

Ron: Tell us about your blog, Joel.

Joel: [laughs] I have this deep passion for lean and, over the years, have really developed a fire within me for helping to pass on the knowledge that people were kind enough to give me to others. One day, it dawned on me that, "Hey, if I want to reach more people and be able to pay forward what was given to me, starting a blog and trying to get the message out there would be the best way of doing that."

Earlier this year, I started up thekaizone.com as my way of helping to advance lean thinking, whether it's in business and whether it's in life, in hopes of helping other people find and start their own lean journeys.

Ron: Go ahead and spell that.

Joel: [laughs] It's a play on Kaizen, but it's spelled thekaizone.com. KaiZone is K-A-I-Z-O-N-E.

Ron: We'll go ahead and we'll link to it in the show notes, which everyone can find at Gembapodcast.com/09. It's a great blog. In fact, Joel, as I you know, I came across your blog and I contacted you. I was really impressed with what you're doing over there. That's why we're taking on this podcast, because I sought you out, man.

[laughter]

Joel: I appreciate it. You might have been the first.

Ron: No. It's great stuff.

[laughter]

Ron: I've told the story in previous articles and whatnot. But starting my old blog, which was at that time called LSS Academy, I did it sitting on my couch one night. I was just like you, passionate about this stuff. I just started writing. Next thing you know, someone besides my mom left a comment. I was like, "Oh my God, there's people reading this."

[laughter]

Ron: That's how I'm where I am now with Gemba Academy -- is because of that little blog. Good for you.

[crosstalk]

Joel: That's a great story. That's great motivation for me. [laughs]

Ron: Absolutely. As I mentioned in the intro -- you haven't heard that, Joel -- we've got a unique angle today. We spend a lot of time talking about lean in the business world, whether it's in manufacturing, or health care, or whatever it might be. But there's also this movement of us lean practitioners who are brave enough -- I don't know brave's the right word -- but...

[laughter]

Ron: Crazy, maybe.

[crosstalk]

Joel: Crazy, perhaps.

[laughter]

Ron: ...Often try to take these principles that we call lean into our home life, right?

Joel: Absolutely.

Ron: With our children, and our spouses, and significant others, and whatnot. What inspired you, Joel, to get things started with applying lean outside of the business world and in your home life? Why did you do that?

Joel: Really two factors. First, I'm big fan of Malcolm Gladwell's book, "Outliers," and I just got done reading the book. I realized, maybe for the first time, the real importance of getting the level of practice with anything that you want to be an expert in. I developed this passion for lean. I saw myself.

I wanted to be an expert. Maybe I wasn't going to be the Beatles, but I'd settle for The Who. They weren't a bad band. I was looking to try to search for ways that I could get practice in a diverse amount of scenarios and really take my practice of lean beyond what I was getting just with somewhat repetitious practice that I was getting at work.

Coming home and applying those same principles in the home life was my initial way of increasing my ability to practice and try to get up that experience curve a little bit faster.

What turned it for more than maybe a couple of tool applications here and there, let's say, if I wanted to learn about 5S, I'd come home, and take a hard look at my pantry and try to reorganize that, or if I wanted to study pole systems, I'd set up con bonds between my refrigerator and the grocery store.

What took it from more than simple practice to a necessity was the start of our growing family. We had three kids, our first three children, in less than four years.

Ron: Good for you, man. Congratulations.

[laughter]

Joel: Thank you.

Ron: That's awesome.

[laughter]

Joel: Thank you. We're still not at six yet, but maybe some day...

[crosstalk]

Ron: [laughs] Keep going, man.

[laughter]

Joel: My wife and I met when we were 13 years old, been dating ever since, always talked about having a big family. People aren't having big families a lot these days. There's a reason for that. It's hard raising and managing a big family, life's complex. There's way more demands in our time now than there were in the past.

Rather than looking at that as a barrier, what my wife and I did was basically sit down and say, "How do we solve this problem? How do we start, raise, and have a happy family without essentially going insane?"

What I was able to do was bring my experiences from work and learning this lean way of thinking, introduce it to my wife, and bring it into our family life so that we could, basically, eliminate the waste from our life, and be able to spend what little time that we're given here doing the things in life that we really love and enjoy. That was really the start of it all.

Ron: Can you give us some examples of what a day in the life of the Gross household looks like? How have you incorporated lean in your life?

Joel: It's tons of fun. Ask my kids and my wife!

Ron: Tons of fun for you or for them?

Joel: A bit of both! In our house, most of what we have, most of the hours that we spend, most of the things that we do, the stuff that we have is all part of a system or routine. Those systems or routines are really designed to help us make the most out of the time that we have.

A couple of examples...I've got, unfortunately right now, about 1.5 hour commute to work every day. I think that one of the things that adds value to my life is being able to sleep and be awake for most of the days. What I try to do is sleep in as late in the morning as possible and still get to work on time. I've developed a very precise routine for how I get out of the house in this least amount of time every morning so that I can sleep in as long as possible.

My wife's got three kids that she's either in the process of or will be homeschooling, in addition to a house to run. She's got a daily routine, for the activities that they perform day in and day out, that they all follow to try to make the best use of everybody's time, and balance all the work and the chores with being kids and having fun.

We've also got a visual management system set up in the home, in the background, that helps us keep it all running and going smoothly. We've got visual routines or a picture base that the kids can follow so they know...

Ron: Let's dig into that. I want to paint a picture now for everyone listening. It's 8:00 AM, the kids are up, mom's ready to go, and dad's running out the door...what's going on? Visual control is like...do the kids have a Heijunka board on the wall [jokingly] or what?

[laughter]

Joel: We don't go that far but we do, actually, have a chart on the wall in their playroom, which is where they spend a lot of their time. It's where they actually do have all their toys and do their home schooling, so they spend most of their time there.

Posted up on the wall, we have a color coded chart that says, "By the time of the day this is the routine that you're going to follow, this is when we eat, this is when study time is..."

Ron: It is a Heijunka box! What are you going to call that? That's awesome!

[laughter]

Joel: I'm not sure how effective it is at level loading, but yes! It's standardized work/Heijunka for their day. What it is is the time. They haven't learned to tell time yet. My wife's the master timekeeper, but they can follow along with the pictures.

She can say, "Hey, what's the next picture and what should you be doing?" If it's the picture of an apple, they know it's time to start getting ready to eat breakfast. They'll go get their plates out of the drawer, they will get their forks out, and get ready to eat. Then, they know the next picture would/might be a picture of a toy truck, so they know it's time to clean up from breakfast and now it's playtime, and so on and so forth.

What that does is makes them a little bit self-sufficient. They get to manage their own time, and my wife can be doing the things that she needs to do to keep the house running, in the background, while all these things are going on.

Ron: Would you mind snapping a picture of that, maybe we can put it in the show notes? I think that would be really cool.

Joel: Absolutely!

Ron: Everyone, make sure you go to gembapodcast.com/09 and we're going to see pictures of Joel's house, here on the wall. That's great! By the way, we didn't talk about this but we actually homeschool our kids as well.

Joel: Small world. [laughs]

Ron: You're doing lots of stuff. Would you say one particular approach or concept's been more impactful than another?

Joel: Absolutely. If you look at the lean world, there are a lot of tools, techniques, routines, and thinking out there. The one concept that has the biggest impact on our lives, though, is the concept of True North.

For anybody who has not heard of True North, True North really answers the question, "What does ideal look like?" When we define ideal, we define a space that we might never actually reach, but it's something that always provides us direction for where we're trying to get to.

In manufacturing a process, the True North for a process might be zero defects, 100 percent value add, one piece flow, in sequence, and on demand. It took us a while to nail down exactly what that looks like for a family, and how do we use that to steer the direction of where we want to take ourselves and our children.

We were able, after a lot of thinking and a lot of discussion, to find that the things that add value to our lives, the things that we want to spend our time doing fall really nicely into four buckets. We call those buckets our four Ls -- living, loving, laughing, and learning.

What we try to do, and this provides direction for the mission and vision statement of our families, is we really put a pretty intense focus on doing the things that fall into the categories of the four Ls, spending our time doing that, and eliminate all of the things that don't add value, all the waste in life, in order to basically get the most out of our time that we have.

Ron: I love that.

Joel: The True North is something that we always latch on to and come back to time and time again to say, "Is this taking us closer or we're getting farther away?"

Ron: In other words, if we're doing some activity that doesn't fall within one of these Ls, then why are we doing it?

Joel: Exactly.

Ron: I don't know about your kids, Joel, but mine are quite unpredictable, at times. I'm curious on how this whole Lean thinking and parenting plays together. What are your thoughts on that?

Joel: They are unpredictable. I'm going to make a statement. I think kids are the most misunderstood creatures on earth, at least from their parents' perspective. I'll give you an example. Kids are born natural lean thinkers. If you haven't had this conversation before, stop me because I think every parent can relate.

Yesterday my daughter asked me a question, "Daddy, why does this happen?" I gave her the answer and then she said, "Why is that?" I answered that question and then she says, "Why is that?" We kept going and going and going until that round of questioning ended how it always ends with, "Because I said so. Now, go away."

Kids are masters of root cause analysis, the five whys, and lean thinking in general. It's because the way they learn about their world is through experimentation. They try things out and find out the consequences. What we do as parents is say, "Hey, don't touch that."

Get that out of your mouth. Stop asking so many questions." We drive that natural curiosity out of them.

What we've tried to do in our house is take the lean thinking model that says, "Hey! Experimentation is how we're going to learn and solve problems," and applied that to our kids. Instead of saying, "Hey, stop that. Don't touch that," unless they're going to hurt themselves or others, we let the natural consequences play out.

When something bad does happen, that's our opportunity to coach them through the problem solving process so that they can learn how to keep it from happening again. We feel passionate about really drilling good problem solving skills into our kids because it's not a major emphasis within school curriculums, to the extent that it needs to be.

My wife's a third generation educator and speaks from experience on this one. When kids solve problems in school, they solve a lot of problems, but they're always given the methods, the context, and the problem and learn to apply the one to the other. It's sometimes more memorization than it is learning.

What we are really trying to drive in with our kids is how do you learn to solve problems in the real world, where you're not handed the context, you're not handed the problem? What we do is we've built a routine and a strategy around that with our kids. Whenever there is a problem, a negative consequence that occurs, we get out a modified version of an A3 that's nice and kid-friendly, and we, actually, will sit down with our kids and walk them through the problem solving process.

I have the form that we actually use posted on the website under my free download section if you're interested in practicing this at home.

Ron: We'll link to that.

Joel: Instead of it being the typical blocks that you'd see on A3, they are five very kid-friendly type of questions that's designed to steer them and walk them through the problem solving process. We'll actually sit down and they'll get to draw pictures of what happened, talk about what should have happened, why did it happen, how do we keep it from happening again, and how do we know if what we did worked.

Instead of problem solving and negative consequences giving them a fear that they did something bad, that they have to not do again, what they start developing is that problem solving becomes fun and, maybe, when they mess up, it's not such a bad thing.

An anecdote. It was so fun the first time I walked through this process with my older daughter. We were looking at how do we keep her from spilling her drinks when we go out to dinner. My younger daughter saw her drawing and having such fun with me she actually went and threw her cup of water over the floor so that she would get to solve a problem, too.

What we're doing is teaching kids, "Hey, it's OK to mess up." It's how you respond and how you think about that. That's going back to my favorite quote, "That's how we keep them moving forward in life."

Ron: As you just realized, I've messed up on my own standard works, so this is real life ties in here. We're going to get to your quote. I'll move that into the quick fire section right as we go. We're going to come back to that because I'm totally boxed at. I apologize to all the listeners who are waiting on your quote. That's coming, so be patient.

Joel: No problem.

Ron: The last question of this section. We've got people listening to this right now, perhaps they have children, perhaps they don't. Do you have some practical advice of what someone can do right now to make a positive impact on their lives?

Joel: Sure. I can give you a potential solution, a potential idea that any of your readers can do, whether they have kids or not, that'll take them maybe an hour and will save them a bunch of time and maybe even some money. One of the first major projects to incorporate lean thinking into our household that we performed here was we took a good, hard look at our pantry.

I haven't met a whole lot of families that have a really nice, clean, well organized pantry that's out there or maybe even a refrigerator. What we did was...when we were learning how to best incorporate this into our lives, we basically took five real simple steps in about an hour. We knocked out a whole bunch of time and saved a whole bunch of money.

I'm going to lay out what those five steps might be that your readers can follow. Maybe they can do the same with their pantries or their refrigerators, and see how easy this stuff really can be. My guidance is go get some masking tape, get a permanent marker, and set aside about half an hour. Take everything out of the fridge or the pantry and sort it out into groups that make sense for what the items might be, like vegetables, fruits, cereals.

Then, take those different groups and, one by one, put them back on the shelf. When you put them back on the shelf, just take some tape and outline where they go on the shelf. On that tape write what goes in that space. Do that until you've got everything back on the shelves. Then, every time you go in and out of that pantry, every time you open that refrigerator, all you have to do is put the things back in their location per the label.

You would not believe how much time you save because you no longer have to look for something in your pantry when you need it. Determining what you need to buy at the grocery store is a lot easier because you can see very easily how much of everything you have. You don't have to try to figure out, "Do I need this? Do I need that?" Because you've segregated the specific section, that tells you how much you need.

Instead of having to look for and determine whether you have it or not, it's going to save you money because you're not going to buy something you already have enough of. That

was our first step on our journey, and I'm encouraging everybody out there, maybe, think about making that first step on your journey.

Ron: We need a picture of your refrigerator. Can you do that as well?

Joel: I can give you one of my pantry, absolutely.

Ron: We're going to have that in the show notes. It's going to be the most popular show notes we've ever had. [laughs] Let's go now and transition Joel into my favorite part of the show, which is the Quick Fire section, where you get to share your personal thoughts and wisdom, which you've already been doing. Now, we're really going to focus a little bit more in on just you

The first one is from earlier, when I should have asked you...we do like to have all of our guests share a continuous improvement or leadership quotation that inspires them. What quotation inspires you?

Joel: I'll give you the one that I have hanging up in my office at home or my office at work. It's actually a quote from Walt Disney. It has nothing to do with lean, but I think it applies pretty universally. Having three kids at home, Disney channel is mostly what I get to watch any more. There was a quote that really stuck out at me in one of the Disney movies I've seen recently, from "Meet the Robinsons."

Essentially, that movie ends with a quote that actually inspired the movie. The quote was from Walt Disney. What he said was, "Around here, we don't look back for very long. We keep moving forward, opening up new doors and doing new things because we're curious and curiosity keeps leading us down new paths." It's a mouthful.

There are two real parts of that that to me are the basis for, not only success in lean, but maybe even success in life. That's having that persistence, that sense of grit, for lack of a better word, to keep moving forward in the face of setbacks and failure, and also to have a natural curiosity about life, and have that drive and that passion to keep pursuing new things and learning new things.

To me, that's the difference between people who fail and people who succeed. It's people who use their natural passion to keep them moving forward and keep them getting closer to their goals or even to their True North.

Ron: I love that. Joel, what does respect for people mean to you?

Joel: I have a slightly biased perspective. I'm going to cite one of my former mentors on this one, "Respect for people, to me, means allowing them to do the work and to get the things out of the life that they were put here to do." One of my coaches would always ask the question, "Why do you have humans doing the work? Why do you hire humans to work your processes to make your products?"

The answer he was trying to steer you to was always, "Because humans are the only things that we can put in the process that can think. They're really the only things that can get better over time. Machines, facilities, everything else depreciates and falls apart with

time and needs maintenance. Because of the human and the person's ability to think, they actually can improve and get better over time."

What respect for people means to me is taking advantage of the fact that the people who do the work and who make the products have this innate ability to think, solve problems, and improve. We need to harness that energy, harness that power, and put it to good use, allowing people to improve the work that they do. That is showing them the ultimate respect.

Ron: I love that. My business associate, Jon Miller, we did an interview. Jon, as you may know, grew up in Japan and speaks Japanese. When I asked him the respect-for-people question, his response was that it's actually really bad translation from the original Japanese. It's better translated as respect for humans than it is for people. It really ties in with exactly the humanness of people.

Joel: Absolutely.

Ron: I have a new question here. I like to keep my guests on their toes a little bit. I'm not sure you're prepared for this one.

Joel: That's OK!

Ron: Let's see how good you are in your feet. The most common question we get here at Gemba Academy, with 500 some videos, lots of different tools, techniques and philosophies taught is, "Where do I start? What video should I watch first, second, third? What's the roadmap?" Our response almost always ends up with a question and it's, "What problem are you trying to solve?"

I'm curious, if you can share with maybe one problem that you're currently trying to solve, whether it may be at home or in your professional life. You don't have to go into great details if it's a professional problem. What's one problem that you're trying to find a countermeasure for?

Joel: I absolutely am ready for that one. I may have mentioned it earlier, at least in the week when we were speaking, I'm sitting here talking to you with quite a number of stitches in my head, after sustaining a fall down the steps after carrying some wash up the steps the other day. I joke about it in hindsight, but I'm taking a brand new look, a fresh perspective on routine safety in my house.

The problem I'm looking to solve is, "How can I make my house, and my family more safe as they go through the routine activities of everyday life?"

Just by taking that more holistic view, instead of saying "Well, how can I keep myself from tripping over my own two feet?" and instead say, "Well, how can we make this a more safe place to live?" We're finding all kind of things that we never really realized were ever a problem before in our house.

One specific example is if you look at...We have a crib in our infant's room, and oftentimes we're tip-toeing through that crib in the dark. There's a throw rug that tends to

pile up on itself that sits in the middle of the room. On more than one occasion, we've nearly tripped over it trying to get the baby to sleep in the dark, and possibly barely avoided an injury in another way, shape, or form, so now that throw rug's gone, and we have a clear path plowed, and maybe we'll think twice about tip-toeing through the room with the lights off.

There have been countless other opportunities where we said, "Hey, we can really improve the safety of our family just by taking a few small steps, and solving a few small problems."

Ron: Joel, what's the best advice you've ever received?

Joel: [laughs] I'll give another shout out to one of my former mentors. I believe I can attribute this quote to him, although I'm sure he picked it up somewhere. He gave me the advice very, very early in my lean career. "It's better to act yourself into a new way of thinking, than to think yourself into a new way of acting."

What he was trying to convince in me, or instil within me is a bias for action. We can sit here, and we can read all the books, and theorize all we want, and often times that doesn't drive a bit of changing into the things that we actually do, and the actions that we actually take. The point was if we take action now, that's actually a more effective way of changing our thinking, than our thinking is in being successful in changing our way of acting.

What that really instilled in me is this bias for acting now, and then reflecting in order to allow my thinking to catch up to the results.

Ron: I love that. I coach one of my daughter's soccer teams. Actually I coach two different of my daughter's soccer teams. My oldest daughter's a really strong player, and I've always told her -- her name's Brenna -- I said, "Brenna, Daddy wants you to play very hard." That's all I ask of my players, is play hard, do your best.

I said, "But if you make a mistake, I want you to make it going fast, baby. Make it going fast. What I don't want are mistakes where you were going slow." I love that advice.

So many folks...and sadly I see in some continuous methodologies. There's some tendency for what I would call analysis paralysis, and it's so dangerous.

Joel: I started in maybe one of these other methodologies. That's where I cut my teeth. That was always my feeling, is I can spend days making this pareto chart, or I can spend days, and maybe I won't pick off the number one bucket, but I'll get darn close if I just start acting.

Ron: Go draw a circle in the ground, and stand in the circle for an hour. That's better than any analysis that you could ever do. With that said, there is a place obviously for analysis, but there's a place for taking action, so I love that advice, so thank you for that. Can you share...You've shared tons of different types of habits, but do you have maybe one specific, personal productivity habit that others might benefit from?

Joel: One thing that both...I use it in my work life, and my wife uses it here at home. We call it our top three board. What we found was we get -- going back to the topic of analysis paralysis -- we have all these great ideas, and improvements that we want to make. Me at work, and here at home, my wife certainly here at home, and we almost get lost in the mountain of different ideas that we have.

There's a tendency to start one thing, and switch to another, and never finish it, and switch to this, and switch to that, and then you never get anything done. The little tool that I've created to get around that is we have a big board, and it has all of the ideas, and all of the improvements that we would like to do, but we only allow ourselves to work on what we consider the top three.

We have three smaller boards above that, and in order to do any work, or to make any improvements you have to actually physically put one of the sticky notes with an opportunity on to one of the top three positions. It's only when one of those things gets done, and comes off that board that you can then move on to the next spot on the board. What that really helps do is make sure that we're working on, and focusing on the right things in our lives.

Ron: I've got to be truthful. I don't know I'm going to be able to release this podcast because my wife may get a hold of it, and next thing you know...

[laughter]

Joel: I'll give you my phone number. She can call my wife, and have a great chat.

Ron: Next question, if you could only recommend one book related to continuous improvement, or leadership, what would it be, and why?

Joel: [laughs] Just one book, Ron?

Ron: Everybody says, "I got three," or whatever. That's fine. [laughs]

Joel: I know one of these has been said on the podcast, so I'll say it, and then I'll move on. I think "Toyota Kata" is the best book on lean and continuous improvement I've ever read. I probably don't need to gush about it because there is a whole podcast that I know you've done, dedicated to it, so I'll switch it up.

The book that's had the most impact on me from a leadership, and a continuous improvement, and just a basic living perspective is a book by Daniel Kahneman called "Thinking Fast and Slow." Daniel Kahneman was actually a psychologist who, a few years back, won the Nobel Prize in economics for the works that are in the book.

What this book does is it takes a really hard look at...If we say that lean is all about changing the way that people think, and it's a thought process, it's pretty important to know how do people think -- especially at that intuitive level -- how do our brains really work, and what are the implications of that?

Daniel Kahneman, throughout his career established countless ways, and common mechanisms that have to do with our neurobiology, and our evolution as a species, that cause biases, and essentially errors in judgement in the innate patterns of thought in our brains.

What he basically has done is he's laid out a road map that says based on the way we think as a species, and based on the way we were designed, these are the common pitfalls in the way that we think that can lead to errors in judgement, and for us to not perceive the world quite as it actually is.

By knowing what errors that we're likely to make in our thinking we can make them more visible, and do a better job of understanding where we might not be perceiving the world quite accurately, and where we might need to slow down, try to seek other opinions, try to seek out the right facts, and make sure that we've accurately assessed whatever situation we might find ourselves in.

Ron: What was the name of that book again?

Joel: That book was called Thinking Fast and Slow, and the author was Daniel Kahneman.

Ron: We'll go ahead and link to that over at the show notes. Gembapodcast.com/09. Last question, Joel. Imagine that you've recently been hired as the general manager of a company struggling with quality, productivity, and poor morale. Really, they're a mess. You were hired because of your continuous improvement, and past success.

As it turns out, the CEO that hired you has given you complete operational, and PNL control, and trust that you will right the ship.

With that said, Joel, what would your first week on the job look like? What would you do, and why?

Joel: The first thing I'd do is I would buy myself a very, very comfortable pair of shoes. I'm thinking something with a nice steel tip, and what I'd do is I'd try to get out to where the action was happening. Where is the actual work going on because what I'd like to see...My first priority is seeing firsthand the dynamics of the organization.

I'm going to take a little bit probably different approach from there. One of the coaching that I got early on in my career, a very common saying from one of my mentors was lean is a social, technical system in that order, and oftentimes as lean practitioners we focus so much on the technical -- specifically what the processes are doing -- we tend to overlook the social aspect of things.

Priority number one for me, in addition to just getting out on to the floor and making my presence felt, would be to start to meet the people, and observing the social dynamics that are at play because you can accomplish a lot technically -- you can put the best technical systems in place -- but if the social aspects, the people side of things is not addressed they're probably not going to work real well.

Priority number one for me is going to be to go out, walk the floor, have a whole bunch of conversations up and down the value chain, and start building some trust with the people, so that we can get the social part of the house in place as we build the technical improvement.

Ron: No one's ever mentioned anything like that on this question. That's why I like this questions, is that a lot of people said go to Gemba, and talk to folks, but no one's ever mentioned the social side of things, and that's so important because at the end of the day, back to the respect for people, the humanness side, that's a very important part of human nature, is the social side of the world, so excellent.

Joel, why don't we finish up this interview? I've really enjoyed chatting with you, by the way.

Joel: Thank you.

Ron: Why don't we just finish up with you sharing some final words of wisdom, and then maybe tell people how they could connect with you via social media, or really any other outlet that you have out there?

Joel: I'm going to go back, and pull another quote out of the box, a Henry Ford quote this time. It always resonates with me. It's short and sweet, so I'll get to the point. Henry Ford was quoted as saying "Whether you think you can or you think you can't, you're right." Believe in yourself. Take that first step on your lean journey. You won't be sorry that you did.

As far as connecting with me, obviously the best way to keep in touch with everything that I'm doing is to subscribe to my blog over at thekaizone.com. You can also follow me on Twitter. I'm fairly active on Twitter these days @thekaizone, just like the blog is spelled. You can also connect with me on LinkedIn under Joel Gross.

Ron: We're going to get linked to everything over at gembapodcast.com/09.

Joel, thanks again for taking the time. I know you're super busy. Good luck with your family. Keep going. I can't wait to see your pictures. We've actually explored the concept of doing another podcast, this one a little bit more analytical, if you will, talking about how our brains work, and stuff like that. That might be a little sneak peek, and maybe you can be a repeat guest on the show down the road.

Joel: I'd love to do it again. I had a great time, Ron.

Ron: Well, take care, and thanks again for joining us.

Joel: Thank you, Ron.

[background music]

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