

GA 008 | Jon Miller

Announcer: You're listening to episode eight with Jon Miller.

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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 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. This is Ron Pereira with Gemba academy, and I'd like to welcome you to another edition of the Gemba Academy podcast. First of all, thank you for taking the time out of your day to listen to what we're up to. We're really excited about this podcast. We're getting a lot of really nice reviews, and some feedback that people are really enjoying this.

I especially want to give a shout out to all those folks who listen to us on their commute to work or back from work and especially to those 'road warriors' out there who are listening to us right now on an airplane. Hopefully, you're going somewhere to do some really good work related to continuous improvement. Keep up the good fight, if you are listening in that manner.

Today, I am really excited and honored to welcome, probably, the guy that's had the most impact in my life as it pertains to Lean and Lean thinking, Lean manufacturing, Lean office, or whatever you want to call it.

That guy is Jon Miller. I first met Jon, gosh, it's been many, many, many years ago, back when I worked at --it's OK to say, I think-- Nokia.

We had actually brought Jon's consulting company in at the time to help us with our Lean journey. That's where I first met Jon. Jon and I actually become good friends.

When I started my old blog, was my own personal blog with LSS Academy, Jon actually gave me a lot of tips and helped me really get that thing going. Then long story short, Jon and I collaborated on the idea of Gemba Academy.

We brought our friend, Kevin Meyer into the fold. That's how Gemba Academy was born. Jon has a really interesting background, you're going to here he was actually born and raised in Japan, so he speaks Japanese.

He learned the Japanese culture. Jon's an American guy, so he learned Lean as you're going to hear in the interview by translating for some of the original Lean thinkers out there, even before it was called Lean.

Throughout this interview, Jon and I are really talking about the topic of how to create a Kaizen culture. What this really means. What is a Kaizen culture, and how do you go about it? Jon's written a book on this topic. We'll have a link to that, if you want to check that out, over at the show notes, which are going to be GembaPodcast.com/08. Enough from me, let's get to the show.

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

Jon Miller: Thanks, Ron. Good to speak with you again.

Ron: Why don't you tell us a little bit about yourself, Jon, including your background? Really, how did you first come to learn about continuous improvement?

Jon: Sure. I'm currently CEO of the Kaizen Institute. Before that, I was a founder and CEO of Gemba Research. I helped co-found Gemba Academy, which, Ron, you're involved in. This is a Gemba Academy podcast. I've been in the consulting and training space for Lean's continuous improvement since, let's say, 1998. Prior to that, I got my start, got my education in Lean and Kaizen and so forth by working closely with Japanese consultants from the Shingijutsu Company, primarily.

They are students of Taiichi Ohno who came from Toyota supplier companies. They were very active, and actually still are active, but they were active in the early '90s, really getting the Kaizen event style of Lean implementation kicked off in North America. I got into that was because I was born in Japan, raised in Japan, lived about 20 years, about half of my life. I spent most of my life in Japan, so I speak regional Japanese and understand the culture quite well.

It was an interesting opportunity for me to do something I had no idea about, which is manufacturing and management and continuous improvement and all that sort of thing. Doing that, gaining a lot of good experience. After five or six years of that, I knew most of the answers, if not all the questions that were being asked.

I set out to do my own thing and start helping small businesses; small companies learn about and implement Kaizen before it was called Lean, before there was a big awareness of Toyota and how great they were at this. I rode the wave of Lean becoming popular after all the books came out.

Ron: Not to catch you off guard, we didn't talk about this, but I want you to say, "Welcome to the Gemba Academy Podcast" in Japanese.

Jon: OK. I guess "podcast" is " [Japanese words] " A lot of foreign words in there, so it just sounds mostly like English.

Ron: That's cool. Before we get into the teeth of the interview, Jon, we'd like to ask all of our guests to share a continuous improvement or leadership quotation that inspires them. What quotation inspires you, Jon?

Jon: I don't know if it inspires me, but I always liked to remind myself and others if they're listening of the Albert Einstein quote that says, "We can't solve the problem by using the same kind of thinking we used when we created them."

We have to raise ourselves beyond and above our level of thinking. It's not just thinking, really. I think what's interesting about this quote is that a lot of neuroscience, a lot of cognitive psychology, social science, a lot of people are understanding now.

Daniel Konomai is a good example of thinking fast and thinking slow. A lot of experiments in this area show that a lot of decisions we think we make are either biases or bad decisions.

Bad thinking based on our inability to understand variation, and how things have through statistical processes and variability need happen over long periods of time, or depending on how questions are framed or how we're primed, we tend to think certain things.

Humans really don't do problem solving very well at all. We really don't do problem solving. We jump to solutions. We fight for our solutions. We don't actually do structured root cause analysis, objective scientific problem solving.

Even scientists have been biased towards their conclusions and selecting data. Of course, they have to fight for funding and fight for tenure. All these kinds of things, it's just interesting, because we can't solve our problems without overcoming our very, very biased adult brains and thinking.

Yet, we're smart enough to realize that, and there's people that are smart enough to experiment and will write up studies and books about that, so there's increasing awareness. I'm encouraged by it, but that's a big, big part of why Lean doesn't work or make a lot of companies really struggle a little bit.

Jon: All right. Jon, the theme of this show, this particular episode is on creating a Kaizen Culture. You've recently written a book called, "Creating a Kaizen Culture." Why don't you tell us a little bit about the book, and why did you write it?

Ron: I have a couple co-authors. Jaime Villafuerte, who is a Lean Six Sigma Global director at Jabil Circuit's. Then, one of my colleagues in Kaizen Institute, Mike Wroblewski, is the director here in the United States.

We had an idea about wanting to do a book about Kaizen that was different and kicked around several ideas. It really came down to, "Why do organizations struggle with Lean, Kaizen, or adopting good adopting good, practical, proven methods?"

It's not about, people don't know how to run a Kaizen event correctly, or can't manage a suggestion system, or don't have enough knowledge as the tools. These things are all true, and people can learn these things.

Even after you get all that, and a major company can have a good 5, 10-year run at implementing Lean, they can completely lose it. Completely fall back, have a change in

leadership, [inaudible 08:57] people in the organization get promoted or leave, and then everything dies out.

Why is it that it doesn't take root? It goes down to culture. It doesn't become a deeply rooted part of how people think and how people come to work. How people think about relationships and customers, and how people solve problems and all those things.

We looked at it that way. Of course, Kaizen Culture, Lean Culture, continuously improving culture, we don't really care what we call it. It's just this idea of people engaged in blame free, objective, fact based continuous improvement, bottom up and top down.

About keeping the customer in mind. Keeping respect for people, and respect for a wider society in mind and so forth. These are some of the characteristics that we put together and said, "These things are what we mean when we say, 'Kaizen Culture.'"

If you lack certain elements, beliefs that are deeply rooted in a place like Toyota or any company that's really committed to Lean, then it's not part of the culture. Eventually even if you have the best ideas, internal consultants, and best intentions, your culture that's deeper, the human nature part of it, will destroy it or erode it over time.

Ron: Now, just taking one-step back. We may have some folks that are listening to this podcast who are new to the Lean world, and they're interested in what we're talking about. Explain what the word, "Kaizen" means. Just for those who might not be aware of it.

Jon: Sure. Kaizen is a Japanese word. In Japanese, it really just means, "Improvement." It doesn't have quite the, let's say, the zing that it does now in the west. Kaizen, was a book written by, "Masaaki Imai, who was Japanese founder actually of Kaizen Institute.

He's the founder of our company. He wrote that book in '85, '86. That was the first introduction of this method that's had some successful Japanese companies were using. It really was just the application of scientific method.

A lot of Deming, Dr. Deming's teachings and other people to say, "Look at a quality problem. Get the people involved who are the closest to the problem, analyze it, experiment. Try to make some make some improvements, set standards, and continuously work towards it."

Kaizen, let's say, modern business or western business, to some people it means, "Small continuous improvements." Other people who have been exposed, I would say in North America largely through Sumi Jitsu Consulting Group other related consulting groups I've mentioned.

Kaizen as a Kaizen event or a Kaizen Blitz. Five-day intensive team based workshop. Both of those things are true, but it's neither in both and more than that. It's really about taking a process or a situation, breaking apart and analyzing it, building it back together, and making it better.

Ron: All right.

Jon: ...The method doesn't really matter.

Ron: Right. Let's circle back to cultures. When we say, "A Kaizen culture," what does that really mean? What is a "Kaizen culture?"

Jon: I'm not sure I really know. I think the book would have been easier to write and maybe shorter or longer. I'm not sure. I think it's not something that I want to define exactly what it is. I don't use a lot of keywords that I'll keep using.

It's people driven, it's scientific, its problem solving. It has to be good and right. It isn't just driving for greater shareholder return and maximizing profits. It's got to have a moral element to it, in my opinion. It's got to be good in sense of "Good versus evil," not just, "Good. Better. Best."

All those things, I think, come from the original thinking of Kaizen and what's coming from. Kaizen culture is an organization that does those things. Has this improvement behavior, and can see examples of front-line management, top floor management, agile teams, whatever you want to call them, all these visible artifacts.

At a deeper level, people really believe through education, training, practice, and becoming convinced that people have great ideas. You respect to listen to people and you create a work environment that's healthy for people physically, emotionally, and psychologically.

Ron: Is it safe to say, Jon, if a company has a, let's just call it a, "True and authentic Kaizen culture." That they could survive the CEO resigning, or the big vice president who implemented these practices in the first place, they left. Could it survive if you have a...?

Jon: ...Yeah, absolutely. The culture's probably the strongest binding force in our organization, and it includes shared values, core beliefs, traditions, common history, understanding of where you're coming from, where you're going, all these kinds of things.

The leader or the CEO or whoever, really is there to wave the flag or steer the ship through the near term situation, but this culture has to be more deeply accurate and shared, and something that people are constantly building and working on. I'm not saying that it can't be affected.

Let's say there's a CEO change. The new CEO is exhibiting all the behaviors contrary to the culture. They single handedly, or somehow, are able to create an environment of fear and blame, and completely change the measurement system, and so forth to where wrong behaviors are rewarded.

Then certainly that person can kill the culture. If the culture is strong enough, if the Kaizen culture is there, people will say, "Look, this is going to hurt how we do things. This is actually going to make performance worse."

If you have a bad system, the results are going to be bad unless you cook up the books. That CEO that comes in and tries to destroy an effective, adaptive, flexible, innovative Kaizen culture, because they think that command and control, and "My way or the highway," is the better way.

They're not going to succeed if it is really, truly a Kaizen culture. In the first place, if you really have a Kaizen culture, you would not have promoted that person or bumped him to head CEO. Yeah, I think that's part of it.

Ron: In the book, you write about something called an, "Adaptive culture." What is that and how does it align with Lean Thinking?

Jon: This is some of the research we did. I think it's a real long study done from Carter and Heskett. About 20 years ago, I think, they studied a number of companies and their performance over a period of years.

Both in terms of employment growth, number of people that they hired and retained, revenue growth, profitability and so forth. They found certain characteristics of the ones that were far more successful, far more profitable in a 700 percent or 800 percent more profitable.

These are the companies that had what they called, "Adaptive characteristics." Characteristics, behaviors, or qualities that allowed them to change and adapt to market changes or regulatory changes, or whatever it may be, changes in the economy.

More initiative, intelligent risk taking, and about a month empowerment. Things of this nature that by now or a lot of these individually are quite commonly recognized and part of some sort of organizational development or Lean and mean initiatives.

A lot of people aren't aware of the study and the fact of this adaptiveness, the ability to change does have a huge effect. It is rooted in certain beliefs, in certain values and culture. That sort of value that says, "Build the culture."

This was one of the anchoring studies we wanted to say, "Here's evidence based on a study that shows that these things are adaptive and a lot of these, I would say almost to every single one, these adaptive characteristics are Lean or Kaizen characteristics. Maybe not all of Lean things are listed there, but certainly..."

Ron: Give me an example. What's an adaptive characteristic? Give me an example.

Jon: Sure. Let me pull something up here. An adaptive characteristic maybe customer focus. Whereas a non-adaptive organization is lower performance over time, would be more bureaucratic, more "Just follow the rules and being more internally focused."

Instead of, "If this is what the customer needs, we change our rules or we adapt." Being more proactive. Thinking ahead rather than reacting and responding. Being proactive is an adaptive characteristic. Being risk-averse versus taking intelligent risks. Non-adaptive means saying, "The market's changing, but we're right. We know we're right. We're not going to change."

Being stubborn, being proud, versus saying, "You know, let's try something different. This isn't the customer's voice. Let's take an intelligent risk." Then how decision making and empowerment is managed in the organization. Very strong, top-down control tends to be non-adaptive, whereas taking that and bringing it to the front lines and allowing or encouraging more local decision-making and initiative creates high creativity, smoother information flow.

You'll see a lot of these things. For example, if you talk about [inaudible 18:49] planning or [inaudible 18:50], that's very much a top-down planning, that's a strategy development approach, but there's what's called "catch ball," which is sending that approach down one or two levels and then it bounces up and down in this process of back and forth. Negotiating how exactly we're going to achieve those things, which is that local decision making.

Versus just a one way, management objective process, which is, "Do this, and if you don't do this, you're fired." Which is unintelligent behavior. It creates fear, it creates people not wanting to stick their neck out. I think that's several adaptive and Lean characteristics embodied in a fairly well known Lean tool or Lean method.

Ron: Right. Let's switch gears a little bit, Jon. Is Kaizen a Japanese thing, or is it something that those of us in the west can also excel at?

Jon: I think it's a human thing. It may be superhuman. It goes beyond human. There are a lot of studies these days that monkeys are using tools and learning how to do math and things. It's quite interesting. I haven't seen examples of monkeys doing Kaizen yet.

Ron: [laughs] Maybe one day.

Jon: One day. I think it's a human thing. It's more than just being able to solve a problem, because mice and crows can solve problems, right? They can run through a maze and find the piece of cheese. Crows can use a stick and dig out some piece of candy that's in a hole or something. That's problem solving in a way, but it's more tool use. We're not talking about Kaizen.

It's not tool use. It's actually looking at a situation and trying to understand what's good about it, what's bad about it, objectively. Not just, "What do I like or dislike," but, "What's needed in this situation? Who is the customer? Who am I trying to serve? What is the purpose of this process? What is my goal in it? How do I do that more safely, enjoyably, efficiently?"

Mindfully, we design that by involving other people, not just yourself. Other people are involved in work in order for it to be able to function. You can say it's social. There's a moral element to it, if done right. There's a very technical, practical, scientific element to it. I keep saying --and I've said it in the book too-- it's really a historical accident that we happen to have Kaizen as the leading word for this type of continuous improvement, and that happens to be Japanese. It's purely historical accident.

Because of the way World War II happened, because of the way American governments sent in experts to teach quality control and TWI, "Training Within Industry," suggestion schemes and so forth, just the nature of the way things happened in the second half of the 20th century.

Ron: You kind of stole my thunder on my next question. Let's keep rolling with it. You mentioned TWI and after the war. There are American roots in this whole Kaizen culture. Is that safe to say?

Jon: Yeah, for sure. Depending on how far back you trace the words, I'm sure they go back into England and Europe, but if you look in the 20th century, at least, TWI, or training within industry, which was developed by the Department of War and the United States to rapidly train and develop and make supervisors productive in the war effort, that was essentially copied and learned and deployed in post-war Japan across industry.

Toyota picked it up especially, because they had similar challenges of not having skilled people and skilled supervisors. A good part of that is problem solving and managing inter-personal relations and building safety into the process. Absolutely, these are not necessarily culturally American, their origin happened to be American.

Ron: Sure. Another thing that we talk a lot about in the Lean world is one of these pillars of the so-called house of that Toyota builder. There are many words for it, but one of the pillars is respect for people. Something that I've always struggled with is, what does that mean? Respect for people. Does that mean we're always nice to people, or we don't yell? What does "respect for people" mean to you, Jon?

Jon: It's not so much one of the two pillars of the house. I think it's one of the two elements that, if you tear it away, it's like a nucleus of an atom. If you look at the Toyota website, they have continuous improvement and respect for people, those are two parts, and within each of those, there are sub-elements. I think within respect for people, there's challenge and teamwork. Under continuous improvement, there's [inaudible 23:38]. I may be getting some of the positioning of the lower elements wrong.

Anyhow, it's those two key elements. What is respect for people? One of the things I think that is interesting or challenging in the whole Lean discussion is bad translation [laughs] from Japanese to English. Really, Toyota, they weren't in the translation business, and I was. A lot of times, words or expressions that come across from Japanese or TPS, they just don't make a lot of sense, or it doesn't make sense why we're using the Japanese terms.

Some terms might seem less interesting or less attractive because of this or that. This is one of them. If you look at the original Japanese, it's "respect for humanity," or, "the quality of being human," or, "the nature of being human." Not humanity as in the mass of eight billion people so much, but humanness. It's a respect for humanness. What does that mean? That means, while we're continuously improving, let's not forget that this has to be ultimately humane.

It has to be a human-centered process. We have to make the way we work and how we do things good for people. Even "respect," it isn't respect like, "You'd better respect me," or, "Show me respect." That's what I would say is the more western idea of respect, which is more individually based. It is respect, it's the same word for respect, but it's placing weight and placing emphasis and value on it. It isn't as much an individual.

When you hear "respect for people," you see masses of individuals and you want to give them individual respect. This is not wrong, but this isn't an accurate, direct translation of, let's say, placing value on quality and being human in what we do and humanity and so forth. It really has quite a different nuance. It's not to say, "Don't go respect that person." Absolutely do that.

I think a lot of people get confused because it seems like it's so different from everything else. That's part of the Lean body of work, which is fairly technical and businesslike. This one is somehow, suddenly very individual.

Ron: My father taught me a long time ago, he said, "Ronnie," he calls me Ronnie, and my dad is very educated, PhD, he was a professor at University of Manitoba for 47 years, so extremely into education and whatnot. He always said, "You can get all of the pieces of paper that you want, but never forget, it's about people." He's so right. We can get so lost in tools and techniques and this and that. At the end of the day, it's people working with each other and living with each other.

Jon: Mutual respect, mutual trust. This is it, right? It's building bonds and relationships between people and not losing sight of that. It really is something. People have to keep it fairly simple. That's the golden rule. Do unto others.

Ron: Right. The last question in this section, Jon, I want to talk about. In the book, you talk about the culture monster. What is that all about?

Jon: The culture monster is something that Peter Drucker is said to have said. "Culture eats strategy for breakfast." What does it mean for people who haven't heard that expression, "eats something for breakfast?" It just means that breakfast is a time of day when you need something easy to eat, right? You can't have a steak for breakfast, unless you live in Texas, maybe.

Ron: [laughs] Yeah.

Jon: You don't want to eat something extremely heavy or difficult to cut up and digest. The culture monster, the monster is so strong that strategy --something that's supposed to be sophisticated and complex and lots of consultants and PhDs have worked on it-- it's like a bowl of cereal. Just gone, destroyed. You haven't even had your first coffee yet, and the culture monster has had it for breakfast.

It means that it doesn't survive. Your excellent plan, your excellent strategy that you've paid a lot for meets your culture of how people actually work and behave and think and relate to each other, it doesn't survive for a minute. The idea of a culture monster is to

take a position to say, first of all, the culture is something that you should really respect, and respect in the sense of even be afraid of, to really know how powerful it is.

Have fun with it. Treat it as a monster. Look at, where is our culture dysfunctional? People shouldn't be beating themselves up about their own behavior. Just think of it something other than themselves. We have, as a group, this culture, and it's a monster. Let's change it or tame it or understand which parts of the monster are hurting us and address it and fix it, Kaizen it. One of the ways we want to talk about culture is to give it a shape and a face and tentacles and so forth.

Ron: Excellent. All right, Jon. We've now come to my favorite part of the show, which we're calling the "Quick fire segment." Basically, what we're going to do here is you're going to get to share your personal thoughts and wisdom, which you've obviously been doing, obviously, but now we're really going to focus in on Jon. This is going to be your favorite part. I know how much you like talking about yourself. [laughs]

Jon: All right. Let's get started.

Ron: When you first started down your journey with continuous improvement or Lean in particular --which, it wasn't even called Lean back then-- but when you started down that journey, what was holding you back from being successful?

Jon: I guess there's two different ways to look at that question. One is, when did I start down my personal journey of improvement as a person or as a professional, and there's the other one, which is when did I get into this career? I was holding my career growth back. I can answer both, unless you want one or the other specifically?

Ron: Yeah. Whichever one. Either or, or both.

Jon: The second one, the career part, when I started out as a consultant --I think I was 26 or 27-- I had no business starting a business and trying to be a manufacturing consultant in North America, because everybody that I was teaching or trying to help was my father's age. [laughs] That doesn't quite work. I didn't look like the typical consultant. I didn't have the typical background.

I wouldn't say that held me back. Certainly if I had looked the part and so forth, things might've moved more quickly. That's a simple answer. In terms of the more interesting question, which is what's held me back in my own personal quest for excellence, or journey to become Lean, or improving myself, and so forth. Yeah, that's a tough question. One of the things is just how difficult it is for certain people, maybe myself. Maybe for others it's easy; to stick to routines and standards, to have a good solid routine.

Partly, I travel a lot, so having even a daily/weekly routine is hard if you're in different time zones or getting on and off planes. Creating a standard or routine that you can follow and improve.

Create checklists, or any way that could have a minimum routine. A part of it is expecting too much in the beginning, expecting to have a really rigid or solid routine, which is not

possible to follow. Adjusting that level of expectation down to set a standard that you can follow or that I can follow, and then improve it.

Don't worry about, "I'm not," whatever. "I'm not practicing five days a week," or doing whatever it is that I would ideally like to do and being discouraged by that. That's a message for everyone as well. The important thing to tell people is, there are no Lean failures unless you stop trying.

There's no failure in continuous improvement until you stop trying. That's the whole idea is that you will fail again and again, and it'll be hard. If you permanently stop, then it's failed in that organization or for you.

Getting to that realization mentally is easy, but being able to put that into personal practice has been hard until, let's say, last few years where I've become older and wiser.

Ron: Right. Jon, what's the best advice you've ever received?

Jon: One piece of advice that sticks in my mind --and it's from in the very beginning when I was really thinking about starting a business on my own-- back in Indiana at the time, I went to a SCORE, Service Core of Retired Executives. S-C-O-R-E.

I didn't know where to go, so just looked up a small business administration or something, and they said, "There are these SCORE mentors that will talk with you." There were a couple of older gentlemen who had sat down with me that would ask you questions. Should I do this or that?

They didn't really have much of an idea what I was talking about in terms of Kaizen training or consulting. They had a grasp of what I was trying to do. One of them said --it was advice that he'd gotten from his father or something-- said, "In life, you do what you want, and you pay for it." In a sense, it sounds like a threat, like you're going to pay for it.

But it isn't so much that as to say you have to own your decisions. You have to decide what you're going to do, do it, and have no regrets, and keep moving forward. Because whether you decide to do nothing or that you decide to do something, you pay for it. Everything, every moment there's a consequence. We live in a web of cause and effect.

It wasn't saying do it, or don't do it, but it helped give me the courage or the awareness to say, "Either way, I pay for it, so if I'm thinking about doing it, let's give it a try."

Ron: Yeah. When I was in high school, I worked at a restaurant. My supervisor was an older lady, and her name was Betty. I'll never forget Betty. I had a girlfriend, and Betty was constantly worried about my actions and what not, and I'll never forget Betty. She said, "Ronnie, if you're going to dance, you've got to pay the fiddler."

[laughter]

Ron: That was more on the relationship side of things obviously, but I think there are tremendous parallels to that in all aspects of our life, right? [laughs]

Jon: Yeah. That reminds me of another piece of advice that I really valued. It's a person who was helping me with just understanding customer relationships and the whole process of engaging customers, and sales, and relationship building, and so forth. He said, "You've got to dance with the one that brought you." The old homey style.

What the context of that was how to involve different kinds of customers, and partners, and relationships and which way do I go in this? Basically, he would say, "You've got to choose. You've got to decide. You can't leave the date you brought to the dance, and find a prettier girl, and go dance with her. You've got to dance with the one you brought."

It was stick with your commitments, your relationships, see it through, and don't be distracted by something that looks attractive and chase that.

That was really valuable because it creates a commitment to loyalty, and partnership, and sticking with it, and valuing the person that's got you where you are, and so forth.

Ron: Yeah. I was recently having lunch with a young man, and he's getting ready to start his own entrepreneurial journey. He was asking me for advice, which was interesting. I'm not just a super experienced entrepreneur, but yes, we've been around for five years or so.

He asked me about Gemba Academy's journey, and I was telling him, and he said, "Well, what's one of the things that you guys did early on that you think others should do?" I said, "We got one customer. In the beginning, we didn't have a lot of customers. We were just starting. We just really took really good care of that customer." [laughs]

Now, we have a lot more than one customer, but we're constantly trying to take care of them, no matter if they're a small mom and pop shop or a huge billion dollar company. We just try to take care of people, and "Dance with the one [laughs] that brought you," is very relevant there.

Jon: Yep, for sure. Now that I think about it, coming from that guy who was probably in his 60s at the time, that's probably advice for females because generally, it's males that bring females to the dance. But nonetheless...

Ron: [laughs]

Jon: ...it applies just as well, whatever the situation.

Ron: Exactly. Jon, can you share, maybe, one of your personal productivity habits that others might benefit from?

Jon: That might be tough just because everybody has their own different kinds of rhythms, and routines, and situations, but this is an interesting question. This is an interesting one because I have a big, very philosophical issue with the whole notion of productivity.

As much as I believe in it and believe in helping organizations improve whatever they measure as productivity, very few organizations have a really good idea of what productivity is. When it comes down to individuals, it's the same. In terms of just getting

things off my desk, and getting things done, and feeling productive, for me, it's fairly straightforward.

It's; keep a list of things, keep crossing them off whether it's on a whiteboard or a notepad. It's surprising how people find that difficult to do. I find a lot of people say, "Checklists don't work for me. Can't manage from an email inbox or whatever it is. You have a list of things to do, you get through them.

Ron: Are you old school? Do you write them down Jon, or do you use electronic?

Jon: Yeah, I write them down. I've got a whiteboard to my left; I've got a notepad to my right. Yeah, I keep that in front of me, and it's satisfying to cross things off or erase them.

Ron: I don't know if you're doing this anymore. You used to, and I actually learned this from you, Jon, is the whole...There are many words for it. Some people call it a kanban board, which is, to me, not really the best term for it. The [inaudible 38:07] guys came up with that. It's a big whiteboard, and I have it to my left.

I just have at the top of it, "Studio, Webinars, Podcasts," and then, "Today," and post-it notes underneath each of those columns. It really helps me stay centered by just having a...just writing it down on a post-it note. When I'm done with it, I move it over to the completed section, and I don't know, it makes you feel good.

Jon: Yeah, that's good. I used to do that a lot, but what I found was that I would just lie to myself and fill the kanban board with more and more smaller and smaller cards because I was greedy about...

Ron: [laughs]

Jon: ...wanting to do more things. Now, I try to keep it really simple. Yeah, that's a good approach. The other thing in terms of learning to be more productive --a couple things, really basic things, but it's all in the basics, really-- is just physically be well. Get enough sleep. Eat three small, regular, healthy meals or whatever it is that keeps you in good energy.

Don't abuse alcohol, or caffeine, or any of those things if you want to be productive, if it's valuable to you. I'm not trying to be moralistic or saying, "Don't drink." You do what you want to do in life. That's a big thing, and that's something that people ignore, that they think they should be able to be productive by using these tools when their foundation is weak.

Ron: Yeah. The best iPad app there is, but you haven't eaten a healthy meal in a week, yeah.

Jon: Yeah, you've only slept for five hours the last five days, right?

Ron: Right.

Jon: You can do that for a while, but not for long.

Ron: Jon, if you could only recommend one book, and obviously your book "Creating a Kaizen Culture" is something that we definitely recommend, but if you could recommend one other book related to continuous improvement, or leadership, or anything in that field, what would it be and why?

Jon: Yeah. It depends on who's listening and where they are in this whole position, what they need to learn. What's the next step for them? I'm going to be contrarian, but I would say I'm not sure I'd recommend a book. I'd recommend some other learning experience.

Ron: Such as?

Jon: I don't know. I'm not going to say Gemba Academy because that's too rough. [laughs] That's too emotional.

Ron: Yeah, you can say that again. No, just kidding. [laughs]

Jon: Sure, but what I mean is, some people really learn a lot from books. I certainly enjoy books, and I read as much as I have time to, and there's a lot of wisdom in them, but what your friend did is go seek some advice.

Ask somebody. Describe your problem to them. Because I really can't say this is a book for anybody who's listening because I have no idea what their situation is. There are great books. Yeah, I could list a few that are general all around. "The Effective Executive" by Peter Drucker. That's a good short book that everybody who wants to be a leader should read.

It's got a lot of parallels with Lean, and Kaizen, and so forth. He had a big impact on the thinking of the Japanese companies' leaders over there. Yeah, the best thing is to go get some advice. Go get out of the house. What do the startup people say? Get out of the building. Go take a walk, and go meet somebody.

Just ask for... "Here's what I think my problem is. Here's what I'm trying to do. What do you think? What's your advice? Is there a book I can read, and is there a tape I can listen to?" and just seek. That's the best thing, just go seek answers.

Ron: Yeah, that's great. All right, so now we've come to the last question. In a pre-interview, we had a good laugh about this one. We can explore what your real thoughts on this question are, but we want to go through it anyhow because there's a lot of value for our listeners.

The story goes like this. You've recently been hired. You decided to come out of the consulting world, and you've been hired as the general manager of a company. This company, as it turns out, is struggling a little bit with quality, productivity, morale.

They're having some hard times, but you were hired because the CEO knows that you know your stuff, you've got a lot of goodness to bring to the company, and as it turns out, the CEO's given you full operational control and really just trusts you to ride the ship. With that said, Jon, what would you do on your first week when you walked into this business?

Jon: Yeah. That's an interesting question.

Ron: Full disclosure; you said that first thing that you would do is...

Jon: No. [laughs]

Ron: ...say, "How do I get out of it?"

Jon: No. The interesting constraints are that, first of all, if I was in a general manager position and responsible for operations, with what I know now being who I am, I would still feel very nervous because I'd want to spend, I don't know, half or a third of my time talking to customers and understanding how we are being perceived, how this business is being perceived.

Even if I fix operations...

Ron: Well, no. Let's assume that you have full P&L responsibility. It's your business, Jon.

Jon: OK, all right. Then it's easier. The operational part [crosstalk] ...

Ron: Yeah, no.

Jon: ...not GM or operation.

Ron: Yeah, you're the top man.

Jon: All right. If that's the case, then certainly I would need to speak to as many customers as possible to see how well we're meeting customers' expectations, and whether or not there are any cliffs that we're driving towards in terms of customers being willing to give up on us or take business elsewhere, and then where the opportunities were.

What we have to do whenever you're bringing about a change effort is not just to say, "Let's fix our internal problems," but paint a bright future. If customers are getting ready to leave everybody and we're getting more productive in the plant, that's a classic mix of productivity improvement and headcount reduction, which don't go well together.

So certainly making sure that we're healthy on the demand side and we have some levers to throw if we could do some good things. That also gives the organization some hint as to which particular product lines, or value streams, or areas are the most needing attention from a customer perspective.

Then, the rest of the time I'd do whatever is needed to try to gain consensus within the organization on whatever the problem really is.

That could be any number of things - it can be walks, small group/focus group discussions, town hall meetings, just listening to people, looking at data, walking through

the value stream and walking through the process, talking to people and seeing what's the causes. Bad morale, bad quality?

Then, I'd want a small team on the side looking at how good our data is and looking at cause and effect relationships between profit and loss quality.

You said quality, morale, and productivity, but those things also have a relationship to each other, so need to understand which of those things are causing the other, if it's poor quality causing morale, or if it's poor morale causing poor quality.

If all things are independently caused by other things, then these are things that...Having that, let's say, non-intuitive, data-driven look helps as well to confirm or deny whatever we're finding out as we're walking and talking to people. That's all in the first week, so that's why I have...

Ron: [laughs]

Jon: ...to make sure...

Ron: Yeah, you've got a busy week, my man. [laughs] All right, Jon, well thanks again for taking time out of your schedule. I know you're busy. Why don't we close the show, Jon, with you giving us some final words of wisdom, and then why don't you tell people how they could connect with you via social media?

Jon: Final words of wisdom. "Just go have the best day you can, and try to make it better tomorrow." [laughs]

Ron: Yeah. That's Kaizen, right? [laughs]

Jon: Yeah, that's it!

Ron: All right. What about social media? Twitter? What's the best way to get you?

Jon: Yeah, I have a Twitter account. If you look up Jon Miller Kaizen, you'll find me. It's jmiller at Kaizen dot com.

Ron: Yeah, and we'll link them up in the show notes as well so people can find you that way as well. Also, they can find you at Kaizen.com?

Jon: That's the Kaizen Institute website. I don't know if you can find me that way, but you can certainly reach out to me via Twitter, and we can connect that way. LinkedIn, if you look up Jon Miller and Kaizen, you'll find my profile there, and you can connect that way as well.

Ron: Great. All right, Jon, well thanks again and take care.

Jon: You're welcome. Thanks, man, have a good one.

Ron: OK, well hopefully you enjoyed that interview with Jon Miller. Again, if you're interested in learning more about Jon's book and learning more about Kaizen Institute, all

that information can be found over at the show notes which is going to be gembapodcast.com/08. Thanks again for listening, and have a great day.

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