

## **GA 012 | Mike Thelen**

Announcer: You're listening to episode 12 with Mike Thelen.

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Recording: 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 episode of the Gemba Academy Podcast. As always thank you so much for taking time to listen to what we're up to. Today I'm joined by Mike Thelen. Mike is a senior lean consultant at the Kaizen Institute where he helps companies improve their way of working.

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Ron: During this show Mike and I talk about the keys to success as it pertains to developing and fostering a deep culture of continuous improvement.

Show notes, which will include links to everything Mike and I discuss, can be found over at [gembapodcast.com/12](http://gembapodcast.com/12), that's 1-2, [gembapodcast.com/12](http://gembapodcast.com/12). Enough from me. Let's get to the show.

Thank you, Mike, for taking the time to visit with us today.

Mike Thelen: My pleasure, I'm glad to be here.

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

Mike: I am actually in Northwest Iowa, outside of Sioux City.

Ron: How's the temperature these days?

Mike: A couple of days ago, it was gorgeous. Today, it's rainy and cold. [laughs]

Ron: The last time I saw you up in Iowa, it was brutally cold. [laughs]

Mike: [laughs] [inaudible 01:36] It was definitely eye-opening, then.

Ron: [laughs] We were real quick to move our stuff in and out, I can tell you that. Hey, Mike, why don't we just start the process here? Tell us a little bit about your background and how you first came to learn about continuous improvement.

Mike: Sure. It's kind of funny. My mom would say that I was this way when I was little. I used to line my matchbox cards up along the wall of my bedroom by size.

Ron: [laughs]

Mike: I actually went into college and decided to go into management. I started with education, believe it or not. I was going to be a teacher and coach and then changed my mind. My last year, I got into a course called, "Industrial Management." It happened by accident because they only offer it once every three or four years. I had a professor that used his own book that he'd written. This book was called, "Total Quality Management."

Back in those days, that was the precursor to what Lean became. It stuck.

It was like, "Wow, this makes sense to me." I was doing it on my own when I was in sales, straight out of college.

Then, about three years out of college, I went from sales manager of a large hotel to a third-shift production supervisor at a small company. That was a pretty big transition.

We had an engineer there that had read a couple of books and he wanted to do this thing called, "Kanban" and liked this thing called, "Cellular flow and layout." That was in the mid to late '90s and that's how it all started.

From there, I worked for some really good companies. I've been blessed with some really good mentors and it took hold. I've run with it ever since.

Ron: Mike, one thing that we like to do at the start of every interview is to ask the guest to share one of their favorite quotations related to continuous improvement or leadership that inspires them. What quotation inspires you, Mike?

Mike: Wow, there are so many. I've read so many books and so many things stick out.

I used to do a lot with Mark Graban from the "Lean Blog." He's got a great collection of quotes. I put a few on there myself.

Einstein's comment that, "You can't change today's problems with today's patterns of thinking, because it's today's thinking that's created those problems."

Probably, the two that I go to the most often, one is by Shigeo Shingo. I forget what book it was even, but he had said, "It's the last quarter turn of the bolt that tightens it."

I thought, "Man, you know, I've done so many setup reduction projections and watch them tighten in bolts of five different lengths for no reason whatsoever." That one is really powerful to try to explain how simple things can be when you stop and look.

Ron: It's so much more than just quick changeover, isn't it? It's that, "Wow, you're right." Why do you even use a bolt?

Mike: You look in office practices and, boy, there is so much paperwork and it's always that last signature. Why do we have seven?

Ron: Because it's the big boss over there who says, "Yes" or "No" anyhow. The rest of us, why are we even doing it, right?

Mike: Then, I use a personal one, one that I've twisted from other people that I've read and heard. A lot of times, when I do an event with a team, I will step back and about the second or third day and say, "OK, how do we get from 'We can't because' to 'What we would have to do?'"

That's a big one, because it's so easy that second or third day and say, "OK, how do we get from 'We can't because' to 'What would we have to do?'" That's a big one, because it's so easy that second or third day, it seems like, for people to say, "Well, we can't do this, because this is false. We can't do this because the server name's obsolete. We can't..." on and on.

That's a big challenge, too, is to get people to go, "OK, forget why we can't. Think of what we have to do to make it work."

Ron: I know this interview's not about me, it's about you, but I can't help but think. You just reminded me of I was in the whole P90X movement a few years ago and that crazy guy, Tony Horton, or whatever his name is, he has probably one of the best quotes ever that I ever heard.

It is, "Don't say you can't, instead say I presently struggle with." I love that. It's like; I tell my kids, "Never say you can't. You just say you presently struggle with."

Mike: That's great.

Ron: P90X wisdom there.

[laughter]

Ron: Let's talk about what you're doing now. You recently moved into the consulting world. Is that correct?

Mike: Yeah, when I got out of college, I went into sales. I had done sales through high school and college. I went into manufacturing in late 1997, '98, somewhere back in there.

Ron: What's been the biggest change for you, aside from being on airplane a lot more, probably? Other than that, what's it like?

Mike: Interesting. I've worked for large multi-national companies, publicly held. I've worked for small privately held companies. I've always worked for companies where they heard about this or read about this and thought it's been something they should do.

They said, "Hey, you've got some experience in this. Come do it." Never had the moment and the ability to mentor at that high level executive and sit down and say, "You know, this is what you have to do."

Being that peon that works below them, they blow you off as soon as you walk out the office door. As a consultant, it's different, because they're bringing you in and, frankly, they're writing a check for you to come in and help them.

They're much more receptive to listening to what you have to say and trying to take what you have to say and put it into action. That's the big change I see is you walk into a facility and they ask you questions and they want to learn.

Ron: They want you there or you wouldn't be there, so that's great.

[crosstalk]

Ron: From your experience, Mike, even before consulting, and now as a consultant, what do you think are the keys to really success of making this stuff work and this stuff being Lean?

Mike: Somebody in the organization has to be a zealot. They have to be nuts. They have to get the bug, read a book, want to learn more, go to a conference, and find a mentor. They've got to be somebody who engulfs themselves in this, because you need that role that says, "This isn't the Lean thing to do," and puts the brakes on the organization.

We saw how easy it is to get cost focused. You need that person that says, "Now, wait a minute. What's this doing to quality? What's this doing to safety? How's this affecting our on-time delivery?"

That zealot can be anybody. It can be internal or external, but you've got to have that power, that passion about doing this. You've got to have leadership engaged.

They've got to be out there visible. They can't be the type to say, "We got this Lean leader we just hired and he's going to do all the Lean stuff on the floor for us."

Ron: Let's dig a little bit more about Lean zealot, so they could be internal or external, you said. Is it better if that zealot is a senior person, obviously? Or, can it go from grassroots up in your opinion?

Mike: There are advantages and multiple ways. It's funny. I just had a conversation with a plant leader about this the other day. We talked about the need for internal versus external.

I said, "The important thing is you've got one. It's whatever you can do." If you have an internal, that internal has to have knowledge.

If they don't have knowledge, they've got to go actively get it. They've got to go and latch on to everything they can get to learn it and understand it.

The advantage of an external is that they're usually someone who has that knowledge. You don't get them that knowledge, and they're not viewed as a prophet in their land as an internal likely is.

But you really have to be that person that's the six-year-old who's lining his Matchbox cars up along the wall. It's got to be somebody that it's just natural, and they believe in it. I've always said when I was an internal guy that I have to be willing to lose my job.

Whether I'm that low-end guy that's trying to do grass-roots or whether I'm a leader in the organization and I'm on a senior staff or a higher level, if you are the Lean guy and you're the one that's passionate about it, you have to be willing to stick to your guns when the company wants to move and do things that aren't bad and be willing to risk putting your neck out there.

If you're going to bow down every time they say, "Cost is the only thing we're caring about," then you're not the right guy for the job.

Ron: Well, what advice do you have for someone listening to this right now? Maybe they're not a senior leader. Maybe they're just a practitioner-level internal Lean practitioner, and maybe they don't have top-level senior support.

Talk to that person right now. What encouragement can you give them, or what advice can you give them? Do they just need to pack up and go, or are there things that you think they can do internally?

Mike: I'm trying to think. I think it was Jeffrey Liker. It was either Jeffrey Liker or Steven Spear. One of the two said, "You've got options. You can make the best with what you've got. You can go find greener pastures. You can make that decision." Speaking as someone who's been through some organizations, the pastures really are never greener. They're just a different shade of green.

If you're going to do this and you like this, and you're going to go after it, you have to step up and go to the leadership. Pitch what you're trying to do, go on the floor, and show the results. You're not going to accomplish anything by sitting in a conference room or hiding in a cubicle.

You've got to get out, go take some risks on the floor, and prove how the Lean principles do help, do matter, and do reduce costs as well as increase delivery and increase safety. Just really show them what it is and how it works. Think about it. You can certainly go somewhere else, but it doesn't matter because you cannot give up. You've got to just keep pushing.

Ron: I love that. In my last corporate job I would say that I was a director, so I was a pretty senior guy. At the end of the day I had bosses who, honestly, to them some of them were very sales-focused. The fact that we had to make anything was more of an annoyance to them I think. [laughs] They were like, "Just sell it." "Well, we actually have to make something, guys, here, too."

That was a struggle for me, but what I found was eventually to your point I didn't give up. I just went after it, tried to make things better, and then presented them real results, tangible results that hit the bottom line. They loved that, and soon they were huge zealots. They were not necessarily zealots, but they were on fire for it. They wanted more results.

They didn't really even care how we got them. There was Lean, Six Sigma, whatever it might be. It's like continuous improvement. Just keep making things better. Gosh, it was a publicly traded company, so they got to tell the street every quarter what they were doing. It was good for that as well. I love that advice. "Don't give up." I'm glad you said that. [laughs]

Back to the whole Lean zealot, you mentioned also a topic of leadership and active leadership. What do you mean by that though? What is an active leader?

Mike: There's a whole bunch of information on leadership, and there are so many different angles that people go and pursue. The funny thing is, when you look at what's been made out as really good leaders whether it's Peter Singh or other people who've written about it, it all comes down to the same principles.

That is, those people get out. They're not chained to their desk. They get out on the floor. They listen. I think it was Jim Womack that always said, "Go. See. Ask why. Show respect." Get out there. Ask questions. Listen to the answers. Don't just blow them off.

The hardest thing for us as we become higher-up leaders is we got there because of what we know and what we've done. It's hard to go back out on the floor sometimes and ask the entry-level hourly guy how he can make this job better because we think, "Well, gee. We've been through that. We've learned from that. We know how to make it better."

The toughest thing about what I call servant leadership is that we have to learn how to get them to see by asking the right questions. We can give all the answers we want, but if we give answers we don't learn. The key is, go out. Go see. Be out on the floor. Ask questions. Even though you know the answer, ask the right questions for them to find the answer themselves.

I'll be honest with you. From a leadership perspective you've got to be humble. You've got to have humility. You've got to be willing to listen to your zealot or your consultant or whatever you're doing to bring in that power, that drive, and you have to remember that sometimes these people know more about things than you do.

I used to say leaders were Jack of all trades and master of none. That's how we get to be leaders. Sometimes you need to listen to the masters who tend to be your zealots, your consultants. I don't like the term "experts" because we're never experts. I've been doing this for 15 years or more, and I learned something new last week.

You've got to listen to those people who are specialists in the area and can offer things that you might be seeing with your experience.

Ron: Excellent. All right, Mike. Let's transition now to my favorite part of the show, which we're calling the "Quick Fire Section." Basically what we're going to do here is you're going to keep sharing some of your wisdom, which you've been doing obviously, but now we're going to transition. We're going to talk about Mike. [laughs] OK?

The first question is in Lean we talk a lot about continuous improvement, and we also talk about respect for people. Many times when we say, "Well, what is respect for people?" no one can really put their finger on it. If someone were to ask you, "What is respect for people?" what would you say?

Mike: Oh, wow. Believe it or not I have a list.

[laughter]

Ron: OK.

[laughter]

Mike: A few years ago we were sitting down, and a couple of us were jotting down ideas and what it is. Then I'm a techno-freak, and I'm out LinkedIn quite a bit, which I probably shouldn't be. Sometimes that can be a disastrous trap, but I get out on LinkedIn and get into some of these discussion groups.

I once posed this question to some people with Toyota experience, people with Lean experience, far more experience than I have to see what their answers were. Remarkably we all have very similar traits, and we also all had things that none of the others had thought of.

When I look at respect for people and the list that I have, which I've added to from my learnings and from my sharing with other people on LinkedIn, some of the big things, have passion. If you're going to have respect for people, you've got to be passionate

because nobody cares about the guy who's got the monotone voice that's just selling a number. It's a lie.

You have to empower those who work for you. If you are too afraid to hand over responsibility, too afraid to give them a chance to succeed or fail, then you're tightening the reins on them. You've got to give people the chance to go out and improve themselves, and that's even at the hourly level. Give the folks a chance to make some improvements.

You don't know what's best for them. Challenge them. Challenge people. That's the greatest thing. I've seen tremendous results when I've challenged people to come up with something, as opposed to yelling at them and telling them that they're wrong.

You have to be willing to forgive. If they're trying hard, and they make a mistake, and they fail, you've got to forgive them. You've got to pick them back up. Help them get there.

Some things that I see from place to place, both as a practitioner and now as a consultant, one thing is, what I call say do. If you say you're going to do it, do it. Don't say you're going to do it and never get back with an answer.

To me that is probably the most disrespectful thing a leader can do is say, "I'll look into that," and three weeks later still you're asking about, "What's the deal with this?" because they don't give you any feedback, any response.

You've got to be willing as a leader to teach and mentor. You cannot just do the job for people. You have to coach them on how to do it.

I'll throw one more out there that's pretty heavy to me. You have to provide the right tools and the right opportunities. I can't tell you to go do a set-up reduction but not give you the tools you need to do a setup reduction, and I see that so much.

I remember one of my first events when I got my mentor, I got a mentor about half way through my career, which once I got him I couldn't believe how much more I learned. I couldn't believe how stupid I was; because I thought I knew what I was doing for the first eight or nine years.

I remember we were doing to the event, and I got a machinist that says, "You know, this would be easier if I had a 22 mm wrench that I could just leave at the back of the machine."

I'm a farm kid. My dad was a farmer and a mechanic. I grew up working in the shop, and I knew all the part stores in town, and I said, "Well, let's just go get one." And the guy says, "We can't. We've been trying to get one for months, and the production manager can't find any."

I drove out across town, used my company credit card, bought a 22 mm combination wrench, brought it back to him, 20 minutes after he asked for it

He was in shock. He's like "I can't believe you found that," and I'm like, "Dude, I grew up on a farm. I know where to go buy tools. I've done that."

That's the case, if we don't provide them with the right tools and the right opportunities. They've got ideas. They just can't do anything if we don't help them out.

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

Mike: My mentor, I got him eight or nine years into the process. I thought I knew all this stuff. Then when I got to pair up with him, I realized that everything he did was good advice. To learn from a mentor was phenomenal. There wasn't any specific piece of advice he gave me, but just the ability to learn from him was fantastic.

I always have to fall back on, I came up in a small town in the middle of the plain states and played sports, did all that, and my basketball coach had a saying. He put it out in front of us constantly in practice, and it was, "Don't let what you can't do keep you from what you can do."

That's probably, if I'm looking back over my entire life, that piece of advice is probably the best advice I ever received.

Ron: I love it. There's so much that we can learn from athletics and sports. That's a great one. You grew up in Iowa right? Is that where you grew up?

Mike: I grew up in South Dakota believe it or not.

Ron: Oh I didn't know that, all right. What about any personal productivity habits? Do you have any that others might benefit from?

Mike: I use my computer like a filing system, and I am pretty much digital. I hardly do anything in paper anymore. I would suggest that when you do training material, I do a lot

of training material on PowerPoint because it's easy, and I use the note section, so that I've got my information down there to remind myself.

I write a personal A3 each year. I try to drive that and use that as my guide for what I'm going to do for the year, which I think is a big thing to sit down and say, "What do I want to accomplish this year?" in that A3 format, because it's that, "What's my current condition? What's my future state?" and it helps keep you focused.

From a productivity standpoint, I have a goal of no more than 10 emails in my inbox by the end of each day.

Ron: Let's stop there. How do you do that? How do you accomplish that?

Mike: [laughs] When I get them, I go through them, and if it's stuff that I need to take action on, I try to take action on it. If not, it stays in the inbox until I have the action complete. If it's stuff that I don't need, I delete it. If it's stuff that I want to keep for reference, then I file it. Again, I use my Outlook like a filing system, like a filing cabinet.

It takes discipline. I'm not going to, I get an email, go, "Ah gee, I don't feel like doing that." We all do that, "I don't feel like doing that right now," so I'll set it off to the side. But, it is my goal that if I've got 11 or 12, and they're all things that I've got to go do, then I've got to pick 2 or 3 and get them done, and get them down, so I'm below my 10 on my inbox. I try to manage that way.

It's definitely a little different being a consultant now. It was a lot easier when I was a practitioner.

Ron: Yeah, you're not always by your email now, so you check at the end of the day, and it could be out of control on you.

Mike: Consulting isn't something that you just go out to the floor quick and do it today. "I've got to meet with that client. I can't meet with them until three weeks from today."

I didn't read the book first. I was this way naturally. But when I did find the book, it fit in with the way I do things. That is Dan Markovitz's book, "A Factory of One."

Ron: Yeah.

Mike: A short read, but that's a great read for office people for dealing with personal productivity.

Ron: Dan's a good guy. We've had him on webinars. Yeah, it's a fantastic book. So speaking of books, and you can't use "Factory of One" now, if you could only recommend one book to someone maybe getting started with continuous improvement or leadership, what would it be and why?

Mike: I answer that question all the time, and it's a horrible answer, because it's a struggle. My personal library here in my office is probably, I'm up over 200 books now, and I've read 85, 90 percent of them. I've got a reading list that really needs me to go fly somewhere so I can sit on a plane and read.

There are probably 10, 20 books in that group, that are really my go to books. If you're going to pull the trigger and say I could only come up with one, the Bible that I use, if I'm going to use a term, the one that I always reference, that I look back in that matches what my mentor taught me the most, is probably "The Toyota Way."

A lot of people are familiar with that book. A lot of people like "The Toyota Way Fieldbook," because it's easy. It's a practical how-to from the Toyota Way.

I do some teaching at the local community college, and I use "The Toyota Way Fieldbook" as one of my reference books for that class, because it's easier for the class to read.

The Toyota Way is definitely my number one, although there are some other books that I would strongly urge people to read. "The Hitchhiker's Guide to Lean," by Jamie Flinchbaugh is one of them.

One of the books that probably gets the least amount of attention that I've had the most success sharing with supervisors and managers is, "How to Prevent Lean Implementation Failures."

Ron: I've never read that one.

Mike: My library is 20 feet away from me, on the back wall, but I believe it is by Larry Rubrich. It's a real simple, digest size book. It's maybe 140 pages. It's small. I read that book, let's see, it would have been 2006, so how long ago was that?

It's a long time to look back, eight years ago, and I can still read that book, and not only can read it and go, "Oh yeah, there's Ron, and there's other people that I can see. Oh wait,

that's what I do. Oops," that's the power. It's such a simple little book, but if you read that book and don't see something that you yourself do, you're not being honest with yourself.

Ron: Awesome, last question, Mike. Imagine that you've decided to get back into the private sector, and you've been hired as the general manager of a company, and this company is struggling with lots of things, the quality, productivity, morale, they're just a mess.

And you were hired because of your continuous improvement experience and past success. As it turns out the CEO that hired you has given you complete operational and P&L control and trust, that you're going to right this ship. With this said, Mike, what would your first week on the job look like? What would you do, and why?

Mike: It's pretty easy what I'd would do the first week, and it's probably contrary to what most people would think if they're going to be a general manager. The most I ever learned, and the best way I ever learned, as torturous as it was, was when my mentor put me in an Ohno Circle for 40 hours.

Ron: Go ahead and describe an Ohno Circle for those that might not know what you're talking about there.

Mike: My experience was we were on the production floor making electric motors, and I had a specific part of the line. He drew a circle on the floor, put me in it, and told me to stand there until he came and got me, which was eight hours later.

At the end of the eight hours, he asked me what I saw and those kinds of things, no guidance, no nothing. I shared what I saw, which apparently wasn't what he wanted me to see [laughs], and the next day we do it over again. We did it for forty hours.

That was a full week, five days of standing out there for eight hours. The only time I left the circle was when the employees went to lunch. That's why I had to take my lunch and be back when they were back up and running the line again.

It was amazing, because to start with I didn't know what I was looking at. Then I started looking at the wastes, the standard seven wastes. Then I started looking at movement, and I started looking at how materials and how things came to the line and left the line, and it started making me realize that you can see so much when you just stop for a minute.

The power of it is, we do it a lot in manufacturing, but I've done the same in a customer service area, and in a design engineering area. I've sat and just watched for eight hours,

and watched the paper flow, and how the phone rang, and how people flowed in and out, and you look and see how much time people spend going back and forth for things. It's amazing.

My first week would be probably a day in each department, just standing in the middle of the department, trying to watch how things work, and capture what's going on. And try to get a basis for what kind of waste we have and what kind of opportunities with flow, and, "How do we improve our flow, and do we improve our work process?" and not do anything to make changes.

Just observe. Just watch and learn for that first week. From there start laying out a plan with the leadership team, "Here's what I saw. Let's go to each department, and let's talk to each group. Let's see what they see, if they see the same thing I see."

It's amazing. I remember sitting through a customer service group, and I saw a lot of wasted time where they're on hold waiting for one of the other departments to get back to them, or waiting for this, waiting for that. They had simple things like, "We're going to change the length of a shaft from three inches to two and half inches."

"Well that's got to go to this guy to be approved. I can't approve that." Take all that stuff out, so if they can just respond to the customer while they're right there on the phone, it was huge for us. It was powerful. If we wouldn't have stopped to just watch that process, we'd never have seen it.

Ron: Excellent. Mike, thank you so much for taking time out of your day to visit with us today. Why don't we wrap things up with you sharing some final words of wisdom, and then why don't you tell people how they can connect with you on social media?

Mike: My final word of wisdom is, "Don't let anything stop you." You've got to keep driving. I know it's frustrating.

Sometimes that's the joy of having a mentor. I remember calling my mentor from time to time even though he wasn't on the clock when I called him on the phone and, "Hey, this is what's going on," or "this is how I feel." "Man, what do I do here?"

Having that person who's been there, who can guide you through it and coach you through it, is really powerful. But the big key is you've got to keep moving forward. Don't let things bring you down. Don't let things stop you from moving forward.

With that, I'm always open for questions, comments, advice, discussions. I'm on LinkedIn more than I should be because I get into discussions...

[crosstalk]

Ron: LinkedIn. Are you Michael Thelen?

Mike: I'm Michael D, middle initial D. So I'm Michael D. Thelen.

Ron: Thelen is T-H-E-L-E-N for those that are just listening.

Mike: It's correct. I only participate in the Lean discussion groups. You won't find me in, "How to increase your sales by 80 percent," and all that kind of stuff.

Then, you can also find me on Twitter. I don't do a lot of tweets, but I do tweet here and there. You can find me there @mdthelen, that's M-D-T-H-E-L-E-N.

Ron: Great. All right, my friend. Thank you again. It's always great catching up with you and hopefully we can go out and do another conference together. Maybe we'll get you over here one day. We'll put you on video and make you a movie star.

[background music]

Mike: There we go.

Ron: [laughs] All right. Take care, Mike.

Mike: Thanks a lot, Ron.

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