

GA | 16 Jamie Flinchbaugh

Announcer: You're listening to Episode 16 with Jamie Flinchbaugh.

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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, this is Ron Pereira with Gemba Academy. I'd like to welcome you to another episode of the Gemba Academy Podcast. As always, thank you so much for taking the time out of your day to listen to what we're up to.

Today, I'm excited to welcome a guest to the show named Jamie Flinchbaugh. I've followed Jamie's work for many, many years. He's been blogging and writing and doing other kinds of lean thinking activities out there. But, I've never had the fortune of actually meeting Jamie, so I was really excited to finally get to talk to him a little bit on this episode.

Jamie has written a really good book -- we're going to talk about it in the episode -- called the "Hitchhiker's Guide to Lean." It's one of my favorite lean thinking books and actually, one of the earlier books that I read on my journey. He's a really good guy. He's very active in the consulting, especially the C-Level of organizations. We're going to have links to all of Jamie's websites over at the show notes, which you'll find at gembapodcast.com/16.

During this interview, Jamie and I really focused on the topic of lean leadership and how to go about developing lean leaders within organizations. We talked about all kinds of things and everything from our experience as soccer coaches to lean accounting and what practitioners you might not have seen your leadership support should do, what they can do to improve their parts of the world.

I think you're going to enjoy this show. Again, the show notes can be found over at gembapodcast.com/16. Enough for me, let's get to the show.

All right, Jamie, thank you so much for coming on to the show. Where are you calling in from today?

Jamie Flinchbaugh: Ron, thanks for having me. I'm calling in from my home office in Berks County, Pennsylvania.

Ron: Nice. How's the weather in Pennsylvania?

Jamie: Well, it's pretty hot today, I'll tell you.

Ron: My family and I just took a big road trip and we were up through Canada, then over to Ohio and Michigan and all that. We got to experience good old midwestern weather. It was actually beautiful when we were in that part of the other world there. It's very cool.

Jamie, tell us a little bit about yourself and your background and your company and what you do these days.

Jamie: Well, I've been working on lean transformation for over 20 years, a lot of time inside companies like Harley-Davidson, Chrysler Corporation, DTE Energy. Co-founded with Andy Carlino the Lean Learning Center 13 years ago now, and worked with clients all over the world and spend most of my time with executive coaching and also a transformation strategy.

Ron: One of my favorite lean books is something that you had a part in and that was "The Hitchhiker's Guide to Lean." Tell us a little bit about that book.

Jamie: When we wrote "The Hitchhiker's Guide to Lean," this was Andy Carlino and myself, we really tried to look at what we thought was wrong with lean journeys. We also looked at topics nobody was writing about. At the time, nobody was writing about lean principles or lean leadership.

So, this became the centerpieces of what the book was about. A lot of it is just a collection of our advising experience, hence the name. The experience we gathered throughout our travels from both inside and outside companies.

Ron: We'll link to that for everyone over at gembapodcast.com/16. We definitely recommend that book if you haven't already read it.

Jamie, so the way that we like to kick off all of our shows is with our guests sharing a quote that maybe it's related to lean or leadership or continues improvement that inspires them. What quotation inspires you, Jamie?

Jamie: One that I've actually carried with me for probably 15 years now, maybe even longer, is by a guy named Frank Tyger and it's "Experience is not what you've been through, it's what you take from it." I always loved that because there's two ways to go through life -- I mean they just go through statically or you learn from every moment. It is about how you learn through all your experiences.

Ron: I love that. I was actually going through your website a little bit today, your blog and digging in. As far as much as I care about everyone and I've been following your blog for a long time, but I saw something that it was interesting. I never knew this about you that you're a big soccer guy and play it and enjoy it with your kids. I'm guessing there are lots of lessons that you've learned from sports as well, right?

Jamie: Well, absolutely. I coached travel team for the last couple years. I think the two things that I've learned the most is that both from a process standpoint and from a people standpoint, all the pieces have to work together. On the team, I coach, which is my daughter's team, we worked a lot on team harmony and cohesion and team spirit. We worked a lot on the interaction on the field as well, the mechanics and the process of a team. You can have all the great stars you want. But unless the team works together, you don't accomplish anything.

Ron: How old are the girls?

Jamie: The team I coach is now moving into under 13.

Ron: Nice. I've also coached my kid's soccer team, so I quite enjoy it.

Jamie, the topic today, as I mentioned in the intro, is kind of lean leadership. What I wanted to start with is what is a lean leader and how would you define this role for lack of a better word?

Jamie: For one, I'd start with defining it as an act. Meaning that lean leaders and the job that we do, it's not a person in a leadership role in a company that's doing lean. That's just simply the role that you have.

Lean leadership really is a process. It's an act. It's a verb. So, it's how you show up in the organization. There are lots of new answers to defining it but to me, the single word is engagement. There are a lot of people that I meet that are highly supportive of their company's lean journey, highly supportive of their team. But if you actually said show me the things that you personally do to enable the lean journey, it's hard to say. They write checks. They show up advance. They kick things off. They encourage. But they don't really do lean themselves. There's a big, big gap between support and engage.

Ron: Back when I worked in industry, I was always blown away if we were doing an event somewhere. Next thing you know there was one particular gentleman. I think he was a...I don't know, senior vice president. He's very, very senior in the organization. This guy showed up on Monday morning in blue jeans and a t-shirt and he joined us that week, like the whole thing. He wasn't just there for a little bit, crawling around. I'll tell you, people were blown away by this guy actively engaging. Like you said, he wasn't there just to kick it off or there for the report at the end. Is that kind of what you're talking about with the active engagement or is there something else?

Jamie: I think that's a good example. Of course, there are more ways than one to be engaged. Showing up to kick it off and then showing up to the report at the end, that's a fantastic way to support. But actually to participate, there are two sides of it.

One is the support you show the team that is more than just the support you show up by kicking things off. But more importantly, I think you've wholly get what it takes for your people to go through and make an improvement because you're doing it too. You are part of the process. You actually see that it's not so easy, that

there are real barriers, both cultural barriers and political barriers and procedural barriers and focus barriers, these all sorts of barriers.

You get to understand that far better if you're actually trying to do it too versus simply just encouraging others. I think there are a couple sides of it. But whether it's the day to day improvements, whether it's real A3 or 5Y problem solving, whether it's participating in workshop events like that, I think it's during the work, not just encouraging it.

Ron: Why isn't leadership development a bigger part of most people's lean road maps?

Jamie: I think the biggest reason is that too many of the road maps are led by individual contributors or other people that don't know what it takes to do that role. They don't even know what to ask for. They know that they're not getting lean leadership from their executives and leaders and managers, but they don't know what to look for. They don't know what to ask for.

As a result, they kind of know that they're not getting it and they'll be vocal about it. But they don't know what to actually ask for. The limits of what they're asking for falls into the domain of support.

They never actually ask their leaders to learn a new behavior, change how they spend their time, change how they solve problems themselves. I think often because they don't have an empathy and insight into what it takes to actually do that executive or leadership role.

Ron: I'm curious on your thoughts. Something that we've talked about and covered recently here at Gemba Academy is the topic of lean accounting. How do you think that fits into the whole concept of lean leadership?

Jamie: Well, that's interesting. They're coming up on the tenth anniversary of the Lean Accounting Summit. I helped kick off the first one, and one of my premises, early on, is that...I would hear a lot of complaints that we can't do the right thing, because the accounting systems don't let us.

It always bothered me a great deal. To me, the premise was that if there's a leadership that knows what the right thing is, and their accounting systems don't quite reflect the right thing, and they still don't do the right thing, they no longer deserve to sit in that chair.

If you know what the right thing is, but you're not going to get rewarded for it financially because your accounting system is, you're no longer a leader. I don't think you deserve to have that chair anymore. If you know what the right thing is, you should do it at whatever the cost.

To me, that's one of the most important intersections between lean accounting and lean leadership. Lean leadership is making the decision. Just because your accounting systems don't support it, you still have to make the right decision. Now, we want our accounting systems to be better. That's the other part of lean leadership. Let's transform how we do things, but we can't use it as an excuse.

Ron: Right. Do you think it's possible for private companies, publicly traded companies, just companies in general to be extremely effective with the whole lean enterprise, lean thinking concept, without traditional cost accounting, if they are doing traditional cost accounting? Can they succeed?

Jamie: Yeah. I've seen them succeed, so I think so. I think it's easier in the private companies. Just because as long as the family or the owners of the company...Whether it's private equity or it's a family held business, and we've worked a lot with both.

They can simply make the decision. They aren't held hostage to a dogmatic view of the organization based simply on a set of numbers. They can establish a vision. They can say, "We know what's right. We think this is the right direction, and we choose to go there."

It's harder in a public company, but it's still by no means...leadership is leadership and shareholders recognize it. They sometimes will challenge it, but as long as you can tell people where you're going, which you at least have an obligation to do, they can make a decision whether they support that direction or not.

I think it's easier if we have numbers that better reflect the true process, better reflect the true cost and not just the transactional cost. I know this is sort of an impossible vision, but I still support Tom Johnson's long standing view of lean accounting.

Our main goal is to get accounting out of management. I think it's still an important tool. It's still a part of the process, but, again, we shouldn't be held hostage by just looking at a number.

Ron: Back to leaders here. What about the process of coaching leaders? What's the best way to go about that?

Jamie: I think the two biggest mistakes that I see people make when coaching leaders, one is that any true coach is in it for the other person. If you find a good sports coach, for example, you really are there to help that other person succeed.

They're there for the team. They want the team to do well, and the individuals on the team to do well. Too often, I see coaches "coaching." People call it coaching, but it's really their agenda, and not the person-they're-coaching's agenda. It's one thing to have a vision that supersedes or is elevated beyond the person you're coaching. There's nothing wrong with that. Making it about what you want versus what the coachee wants. Making it about your success versus about the other person's success. That's a recipe for failure.

Ron: Yeah. Along the same lines, being in the youth sports world, I see that also with parents. The bad leadership parents, if you will, are the ones living vicariously through their kid. The kid obviously isn't passionate, but mom or dad sure is. It can go both ways, right?

Jamie: Absolutely. I could hijack this conversation with stories just about that topic, but I won't.

Ron: Exactly.

Jamie: I think the other thing that I think is the second biggest mistake is just not having a process for coaching. People go in and say, "Yeah, I share my wisdom, and I do what I call drive by coaching. I pop in a few comments here and there."

But, they don't really have a process, a plan. They don't really practice "Plan, Do, Check, Act" within their coaching. I think that's critical. I think you need a process. You need a technique. You need a methodology. Without that, just like any process, without a process, very unlikely to get to your destination. I think that's true of coaching as well.

Ron: The last question. I'm going to kind of turn the tables a little bit. We've been talking about lean leaders and so forth, but what about if someone is, maybe, a frontline associate. They're passionate about lean. They're fighting the good fight on a daily basis.

But, they're not a supervisor. They're not a manager. They're not in, technically, a leadership position, if you will. Let's say that this practitioner doesn't have senior leadership support.

Maybe, like you said, there's folks that...They'll turn up then take off or something like that, but they're not really behind these practitioners. And when the going gets tough, oh, we don't have time for that lean stuff or that continued improvement stuff.

These practitioners who want to succeed, but they don't have that leadership support, what can they do?

Jamie: I think the whole idea is that they don't have the decision rights for stuff that is larger than their domain. But, they do have decision rights for their domain.

I remember one of our very first classes when we opened the Lean Learning Center. We had a supervisor from a large tractor company. He said, "What can I do? I'm just a supervisor of 11 people."

All right. Take 11 people and the decisions that you own, and go apply lean. Go do a good job. If you're doing it to drive performance, as long as you're not trying to

change other people's worlds where you don't have the decision rights, nobody is going to hold you back.

Now, you're not going to change the company that way, but you're at least going to do a better job. Quite frankly, if you do a better job regardless of whether you put a name on it or not, you're more likely to get promoted. Now, your decision rights are broader.

It can be frustrating that there's lots of things going on around you that aren't headed in the right direction and aren't supportive and aren't part of lean. But, take the ones that you can control and do a good job with that and support the people you do support.

Ron: I love that. I love hearing the stories of how the guy was a machinist and worked his way up. Now, he's the CEO. He probably did exactly what you just described. He made his job better or her job better. The next thing you know they move up and move up. The next thing they're running the company.

Jamie: Even when you get to that point, everybody things that eventually we need to get the CEO on board when I can get the CEO. CEOs have bosses too, between banks and shareholders and customers and regulators who all put restrictions on them.

I've met CEOs who thought they were finally ready to rule the roost, and they spend 60 percent of their time on regulators, banks, and boards. They have very little time to actually run the company. You take the hand you're dealt, and you take the constraints you have. You work the best you can within those boundaries.

Ron: Excellent. Let's transition now into my favorite part of the show, which we call the Quick Fire section. This is where you get to share your personal thoughts and wisdom, which you've been doing, but now we're going to really focus in on Jamie a little bit.

We lean thinkers spend a lot of time talking about respect for people and how important it is to always do that. To put your finger on what does respect for people

mean or look like, that can be difficult. What does respect for people mean to you, Jamie?

Jamie: Let me start by saying what I think it isn't. I think it isn't about being nice. It doesn't mean you have to be mean. That's not the heart of it, even though I often see people thinking that's the heart of it. To me, the heart of it is really around developing people and the fact that I want the people around me to be better off, to be more capable, to have more ownership, whatever that might be, than they did before I found them.

I want people to grow. That, to me, is respect for people. Sometimes it involves coaching. Sometimes it's about giving them opportunity. Sometimes it's about giving them degrees of freedom. Whatever it is that helps those people develop and take more ownership over their lives and develop more capability, that, to me, is the ultimate respect for people. Sometimes doing those things means you won't be their friend and they may not like everything you've done, but they're still better off for it.

Ron: Exactly. One of the most common questions we get at the academy with videos and what not is, "What video should I watch first?" Our response is normally, "What problems are you trying to solve? What ails you, if you will?" I'm always curious. What's one problem that you're trying to solve right now, Jamie?

Jamie: I think related to the topic, I'm really trying to solve the self-development of leaders, helping leaders find ways to manage their own self-development. I spend a lot of my time coaching people. Bandwidth becomes the biggest problem. I only have so many hours to go around and work with people. They can only pay for so many visits.

I'm really trying to find ways, techniques, methodologies that really get leaders to take significant ownership over how they manage their own learning cycle and their own development. Of course, time management becomes a big part of that, because that's a big constraint on everybody's plates today. That's one of the problems I've been trying to solve of late.

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

Jamie: I think the best advice is more unique. There's lots of generic advice that's always very good. Make every career decision based on learning first. I've twice taken pay cuts specifically because what I was going to go do next I was going to learn more in.

Whether it's joining a board of directors, I recently joined the board of a 120 year old company. The sole reason was I wanted to learn how they did that. That's really cool, 120 years. To make every career decision, the first factor is, "What are you going to learn?" I've really tried to apply that in every career decision I've made. I think it's served me pretty well.

Ron: Jamie, do you have a personal productivity habit that others might benefit from?

Jamie: The thing that works for me is I have weekly standard work. I call it control point standardization. Others might call it leader standard work or even manager standard work. I have one sheet of paper that really lays out my routine of what's important each week.

Mostly, it's things that I don't naturally do, that are easy to get distracted from. It changes over time based on my priorities changing or based on me developing good habits, in which case I don't need good reminders anymore.

I have a part of it that's the same every single week. Part of it is about laying out my priorities each week. Part of it is based on reflection. Part of it is just based on capturing actions. I have standard work that I practice each and every week. I'm not inherently built for discipline. When I commit to a process, I can be disciplined, but if I don't have that process, it's very easy to lose focus and get distracted by the shiny object. That's what's worked well for me.

Ron: How do you monitor how well you're doing? Do you check things off?

Jamie: It's each week I have the things I do every single week, and I have the things that I plan to do that week as priorities. I just look at how many of those

standard things I actually got done and how many of the priorities I actually got accomplished.

They'll be really bad weeks because of a combination and lack of focus. I got very few of my top priorities finished. Well, that's a good lesson. Figure out why and do better the next week. I don't turn it into a metric, but it's pretty obvious at the end of the week whether I was focused or not.

Ron: If you could recommend one book, and "Hitchhiker's Guide to Lean" is obviously something that we recommend, but in addition to that, if you could recommend one other book related to continuous improvement or leadership, what would it be and why?

Jamie: I think the book that has had the biggest impact on me, and it's not exactly an easy one to recommend because it is hard to read, is "Man's Search for Meaning" by Viktor E. Frankl. It's a pretty powerful book. It was written while Frankl was in the concentration camps.

It really is about purpose and man's search for meaning. What is our purpose? Finding your purpose and having that be the driving force in all that you do, your decisions, your behaviors, and your focus, just creating meaning to overcome all the adversity.

Adversity without mean to overcome it is a horrible way to exist. Adversity in the face of a purpose is very tolerable. The way it was written, the context in which it was written and, of course, the message itself, it's just been a very powerful book. It's been a long time since I read it last, but a very powerful book for me and several others that I know that have read it as well.

Ron: I've not read it. Why do you say it's difficult to read? His writing style?

Jamie: Some of it is the writing style, but some of it also is just the fact that it's written from the confines of concentration camp. The context under which it's written...I wrote half of my book sitting at a coffee shop. He didn't quite have the same nice conditions for thinking through his message and his research and

everything else. That became really what made, I think, the message so powerful is that his life's purpose is what carries him through.

Ron: Last question, Jamie. Imagine you've been hired as the general manager of a company that's struggling with quality, productivity, poor moral. Really they're just a mess. You were hired because of your experience and your past successes.

The CEO that hires you is giving you complete operational and P&L control. They trust that you're going to right this ship. With this said, what would you do on your first week and why?

Jamie: I think I have to first cautiously answer that by saying that if I had a pat answer for that under all conditions, it would probably be the wrong one. I think you have to read each situation and develop a unique plan. I think in a general sense, my base plan going into a situation like that would be to really spend the entire first week getting a deep sense of current reality.

I'd probably start with the customers, going off visiting as many customers as possible. Of course, it varies greatly if it's a consumer products company than if it's a three client business to business company. I'd want to first get an understanding of what's the clients are saying about us. What is their opinion? What is their perspective? What is their experience? What do they value?

I'd then want to understand the employee side. What's their context? Do they feel appreciated, under appreciated, engaged, unengaged?

Third, I'd want to understand the process. I'd want to go from beginning to end and walk the value stream basically.

Fourth, and again, logistically, it never quite works out in a linear way, but fourth I'd want to understand the strategy and the management and how the strategy affects management, meaning does everyone know where they're going, do they not know where they're going? Do they have a work plan to get there? Are they just reacting to what's in front of them? How does management do their work and how clearly connected are they to the strategy of the company? In a week's time,

you can get a good baseline on each of those and at least know where to dig in a little bit deeper next.

Ron: Very good. Thank you so much for taking time to come onto the show. Let's go ahead and wrap it up with you offering some final words of wisdom. Then why don't you tell people how they can connect with you on social media or any other outlet that you prefer?

Jamie: Certainly. My most important advice that I've been finding lately is ownership. People have to take ownership over their situation. I get a lot of people who talk to me about, "I can't get my boss to do this. My situation isn't right. I can't make these things happen."

Those are just problems that we have to own and say, "I'm part of that problem, because it does surround me. Just the fact that I haven't found a way yet makes me part of the problem. I've either solved it, or I'm part of it. I can't detach from it." Invest yourself in where you need to go. Really ask yourself how far you're willing to go to make your own personal vision happen. If you think you need to turn left, what is it going to take to turn left? What are you willing to sacrifice, give up, risk, or take on and persevere with to make that, achieve that outcome? We can't sit around and wait for things to happen for us. We really have to take that ownership.

Ron: How can people connect with you?

Jamie: I think the easiest place is on my blog, jamieflinchbaugh.com. I've been writing there for awhile. I intend to get back to writing a little more frequently than I have been. Hopefully, I'll have a fairly steady pace of content, but also you can reach me directly through the website.

You can also find me on Twitter at @flinchbaugh. You can find me at leanlearningcenter.com as well. Those are probably the easiest places to find me or just to follow me.

Ron: All right, very good. It's July 2nd, today, when we're recording this. We won't release this for a few more weeks, but happy fourth of July. Good luck with your

daughter's soccer team. Do you guys enter into your year change right now? Is that how it works there?

Jamie: Well, our year change, but we're also, you know, tournaments, practice, and already time to get ready for football.

Ron: Very good. All right. Thanks again, Jamie. Be well.

Jamie: Thank you. Same to you.

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