

# THE KEY TO A CULTURE OF CONTINUOUS LEARNING: BE SERIOUS

by Katie Anderson



Many lean management principles sound simple, but they are not always easy to put into practice. Even established leaders need support – through coaching and intentional practice – to ingrain them as habits.

In Japan earlier this year, one of the participants on my executive Japan Study Trip program asked Isao Yoshino, a 40-year Toyota leader and subject of my book *Learning to Lead, Leading to Learn*, what it takes to really create a culture of continuous learning and operational excellence.

His answer: *leaders must be serious*. By this, he meant that leaders must both be committed to

their vision and identified outcomes, and the actions they take to realize them.

I wholeheartedly support Mr. Yoshino's comment. Organizational transformation only happens when leaders are serious about creating a culture of continuous learning, and disciplined about how they show up each and every day to lead and support this culture. When leaders are not serious about what it takes – including their own individual actions and the new habits they need to develop – it is almost impossible to create a real culture of learning.

**Definitions of Serious** (from Miriam Webster)

- requiring much thought or work
- of or relating to a matter of importance
- being in earnest

Being serious is not about being perfect. Rather, it's about being intentional about the impact you want to have and how your actions influence that impact. It's about getting up when you stumble, learning from your mistakes, and endeavoring to realign your actions with your purpose.

To do so all comes back to the simplicity of what it means to be a leader in what I call Leading to Learn® – set direction, provide support, and develop ourselves.

**A Leader's Role in Leading to Learn**

It's been three years since I first introduced the Leading to Learn® framework with the publication of *Learning to Lead, Leading to Learn*, which was inspired by an early comment that Mr. Yoshino made about the role of a leader.

To celebrate the book's recent receipt of the Shingo Publication Award, I want to go back to the simplicity of this framework and highlight several key elements I consider to be essential practices for any leader who is serious about creating a culture of learning in their organization.

The first time I encountered Isao Yoshino was in 2014 when he and John Shook (now the

Chairman of Lean Global Network) took the stage at a conference to share their experiences about working together as manager and direct report. Something Mr. Yoshino said then about his role as John Shook's manager struck me as particularly profound:

*"My aim as a manager was to develop John by giving him a mission or target, and to support him while he figured out how to achieve the target. And as I was developing John, I was aware that I was developing myself as well."*

In this one statement, Mr. Yoshino summed up what I consider to be the essence of leadership and what I now consider to be the Leading to Learn® framework.

Leaders who are serious about creating a culture of learning and excellence focus on three core elements:

- 1. Set the direction:** Issue a clear challenge, goal, or target for your people.
- 2. Provide support:** Help your people develop themselves as learners and leaders and create the systems that enable their success.
- 3. Develop yourself:** Constantly improve yourself as a leader and a learner.

This Leading to Learn® framework is a powerful construct — simple in concept, but more challenging in practice — for what it means to lead and learn to help your people, yourself, and your organization.

The powerful simplicity of this framework has resonated with tens of thousands of leaders worldwide...and yet the challenge in creating more robust corporate learning cultures like Toyota continues. It is up to each of us, no matter our formal role, to apply them in our own practice – with seriousness.

Ask yourself:

- How are you clearly articulating the needed goal or outcome – for your team or organization?
- How are you supporting others to grow and develop, and creating the conditions for their learning?
- How are you practicing – with serious commitment – each and every day to personally improve?

Below are four ways that leaders at all levels can demonstrate that they are serious about creating a culture of learning. Practice these with commitment – and a willingness to learn along the way – and you will see the positive impact in your team, your organization, and yourself.

### **Connect with Your Intention**

Intentionality is synonymous with deliberate, purposeful and conscious thoughts and actions. It requires serious personal awareness and a willingness to adjust to the needs of your own situation or circumstances as well as those around you. It's much easier

to not be intentional than to be intentional; however, where there's an intentional will, there's an intentional way.

I like to describe that **Intention = Heart + Direction®**.

Intention is about knowing our purpose inside your heart and the impact you want to make, and then taking actions that align with that purpose and desired impact.

One of the best ways to align with your intention is to take "intention pauses" throughout your day. We move so fast each day that it is easy to react instead of proactively choosing our actions that will create our desired impact.

By taking a short intention pause to connect with your heart – your purpose – you remind yourself of your role in the current situation, what outcomes you desire, and what actions you need to take to create that impact. These micro intention pauses can help refocus yourself on the actions you truly want to take, rather than being reactive and falling back on less effective habits.

### **Asking More (and More Effective) Questions**

Asking questions is one of the arts of leadership — of learning how to navigate the continuums between asking and telling, expert and coach, and achieving business results and developing people at the same time.

Most of us start our careers as individual contributors, with a focus on our personal impact within an organization, a business, a cause, or a team. We are rewarded through our education and in these early career roles for being the one with “the right answer.” Our corporate structures reward content experts and problem solvers—“firefighters” who come in to save the day—for their answers or heroics with promotions into management positions.

While we may have excelled in earlier roles, being an effective leader requires shifts from content expert to people coach and from project-based work to people leadership.

As humans, we have an inherent desire to be helpful. When someone comes to us with a problem, it is instinct to jump in with our advice or tell the other person how we might solve the problem. But research has shown that asking questions is the most effective way to help someone and not take ownership away from solving the problem.

However, beware – as I described in an earlier theleanmag article titled [“Solve More Problems by Asking Better Questions: The Impact of Breaking Your Telling Habit”](#), not all questions are created equal. How many times have you asked a question that was really a suggestion in disguise? These leading and prompting “questions” are like a wolf disguised as a sheep...they are really just your ideas with a question mark on the end, and

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they have the same impact as directly telling someone what to do and how to do it.

Asking questions is simple in theory but requires serious commitment and practice to do it effectively.

#### **Go See: “Go to Gemba”**

As I highlight in *Learning to Lead, Leading to Learn*, “Going to gemba” differs from the traditional practice of “management by walking around” where managers conduct unstructured visits to the workplace. In contrast,

leaders who are serious about creating a culture of learning “go to gemba” with a definite purpose. They define why they are “going to see,” and take a serious, structured, intentional approach for how they will conduct the visit.

In addition to going to see to get facts, there is a deeper — and perhaps more important — purpose going to gemba. Leaders who are serious about creating a people-centered culture of learning go to gemba to show they care.

Going to gemba – with a commitment to learning – is about:

- Getting out of the office or conference room to visit the actual worksite with purpose.
- Deliberately checking on the status of specific work processes and outcomes.
- Validating data and assumptions with observable facts.
- Talking with the actual people involved — employees, clients, suppliers, partners — with an intention to learn their perspective and to show you care.

By going to the place where someone works, seeing what they experience every day, and talking with them directly, you demonstrate that you are invested in them as human beings. When you intentionally check in with your team – by asking effective questions with care and curiosity, listening to genuinely learn and discover the challenges they may be facing, and providing support and assistance if needed – this is people-centered leadership at its core.

*“Going to gemba makes people feel like they are important.” – Isao Yoshino*

## Reflect

Purposeful, honest self-reflection — in business and in life — can help us make better decisions and can allow us to lead ourselves and others more effectively. It is through reflection that we can learn, and then choose to adjust. Learning is never perfect, and it is never complete. (I share more about this concept in another theleanmag article: [“The Key to Effective Problem Solving? It's in the Study.”](#))

The concept of hansei, of reflection, is the foundation of my book — and of learning. Hansei — a Japanese word that translates to “self-reflection” — represents the deeper learning that comes from examining the past and making corrections for the future. I believe that reflection is the beginning, not the end of learning.

Unless reflection – for ourselves or for our team – is scheduled and seen as a priority, it is easy to get caught up in the day-to-day needs and lose sight of the bigger picture. As I demonstrate in my book, Toyota is a great example of a company that prioritizes reflection and regularly conducts checks to identify areas for continuous improvement. Reflection and studying are rewarded as much – or more – than doing, as Toyota's leaders know that learning is what accelerates improvement and innovation. By creating a habit of reflection, you will stay focused and motivated to achieve your goals and learn from what is working and not working.

## Commitment to Being a Serious Leader

By committing yourself to the fundamentals of Leading to Learn®, you can demonstrate your seriousness to creating a culture of continuous learning in your organization...and of continuous learning and improvement for yourself. It's not always easy, but with intention, practice, and reflection, your impact will amplify. This is how we grow our Chain of Learning® – together, with seriousness. ■