Transcript of The WLEI Podcast:

Learning to Lean, Leading to Learn: Harvesting Wisdom from Work with Katie Anderson and Isao Yoshino

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Featuring Host Tom Ehrenfeld with Katie Anderson and Isao Yoshino

Falling short of achieving desired results may be labeled as failure. Yet a more productive way to frame this effort could be to say: "it's only a failure if you don't learn." These words come from Mr. Isao Yoshino, who spent his career at Toyota (where he was one of John Shook's mentors) and participated intensely with author Katie Anderson in her new book Learning to Lead, Leading to Learn. In this transcript of the latest WLEI podcast, we dive deep into the nature of learning with a Lean system.

Tom:
Welcome to the WLEI podcast and it is just a pleasure to have Katie Anderson and Isao Yoshino for a conversation about Katie's new book called, "Learning to Lead, Leading to Learn: Lessons from Toyota Leader Isao Yoshino on a Lifetime of Continuous Learning."
And I'm going to editorialize here: this is just a great book, and I cannot recommend it highly enough. It's just a lovely, engaging, just an immediate book about the lessons of Mr. Yoshino from a lifetime of work at Toyota and the kind of magic of Katie's presentation of this is that it's very personal and personable and rooted in the details of his work and the animating force that continually drives him which is a very people-centered approach to work in which learning and growth and improvement is the goal. It's very much about the process of learning through experimentation and reflecting on that.
Welcome to Katie and welcome to Mr. Yoshino.

Mr. Yoshino:
Thank you.

Katie:
Thank you. I really appreciate that.

Tom:
Mr. Yoshino, there's a lovely forward that you've written, and I've asked you to read us a paragraph from it. So please take us there.

Mr. Yoshino:
Okay. I want readers to recognize that I don't think of this book as my personal story. My own experience is not what is important--it is just the learning experience of one person. The many lessons about Toyota contained in this book come, after all, from just one man who spent 40 years there. I believe my conversations with Katie--and my memories--the general feeling of Toyota people in my days. Through my specific experiences on my own, this is not just Yoshino's personal history--it's like

Katie asked all 70,000 people at Toyota about their experiences of learning to lead and leading to learn through me, and I directly answered. I'm answering about our culture at Toyota and our way of thinking. These stories are the history of my involvement at Toyota, and the lessons I learned from my experiences. In many ways, it's not about me--it's about all of us.

Tom:
Thank you. I think that's just one of the great things about the book:that it's very personal about you but in a way that's very universal about your lessons.
Here's my question: I think in the early years that Japanese management for lack of a better word, was understood in the U.S., it was seen in a very technical way. As Six Sigma, QPC [Quality Process Control], statistical methods of controlling variation. It was very much framed as mechanical improvement systems, and I think with the publication for one, of John Shook's *Managing to Learn* and a growing number of books including *The Lean Sensei,* and *The Lean Strategy,* that the system is increasingly viewed culturally and as a human system of mentoring, coaching, and very intentionally creating the conditions for learning.
Can you speak to that? Would you think that's a fair assessment and how does that strike you?

Mr. Yoshino:
Yes, I agree with your opinion. In the past, maybe '60s and '70s, many Japanese businesspeople tried to learn all those technical skills—how to analyze and what kind of action plans to implement in the working place or things like that. So, they are focusing on the techniques and skills and things, but maybe during that period—I joined Toyota in mid-60s—so I started learning all those skills, too. But at the same time, I learned how to coach people or how people treated the people working for them. So, people-oriented management is something new to me, and that is maybe something which makes Toyota different from the rest of other companies.

Mr. Yoshino:
That is one of the things that I was so fascinated about Toyota. Katie asked so many questions about my mistakes, because this book is full of mistakes and all those, you know, bad experiences that I went through but, again, it's a very much important resource of learning. And that is one of the things that I was so impressed with: the way Katie put all those things in this book.

Tom:
I think that by doing so we get to a fullness of the system. Of a system that's about working and living a life full of purpose and intention. Katie, I want to ask you to read a brief passage from your preface on page 17 and when you're done, please footnote it with your own comments, okay?

Katie:
Over the two years leading up to the publication of this book, we talked several times a month. In the evening, for me, after my kids were in bed, and in the midday for Mr. Yoshino. We found ourselves laughing intensely on video calls when Mr. Yoshino remembered some long-hidden stories, and we hope they inspire some smiles from you as well. And there have been memories of more difficult periods that have caused us to pause and revisit piece by piece over time.
Through our discussions and friendship, we have both learned more deeply what it means to weave a life of purpose and intention. We have discovered we share a common fabric of purpose. To lead international lives, to help others discover their best selves, and discover our best selves at the same time. Our conversations have led not only to a greater level of understanding for Mr. Yoshino about his

life experiences, but have led me to have deeper insights both on my own practices and on principles that I have known about from reading about Toyota.
From hearing about Mr. Yoshino's stories and perspectives, I've gained access to knowledge and insider stories that neither I nor you could have read in books until now.

Tom:
Excellent. So please tell us more about what you're saying there.

Katie:
Well first, the book itself was created through collaboration, as Mr. Yoshino just explained. The pattern of our relationship was established early on when I first moved to Japan in 2015, and we first met and started talking in Mr. Yoshino's office. And it was in the early days of writing my blog, when I had—being a lean practitioner living in Japan—and this became just how we talked and learned from and with each other. And our relationship deepened over the course of the years, and I discovered for myself not only how much I was learning from these conversations, but it really struck me how much these stories and experiences needed to be shared with the broader world.
Not just Mr. Yoshino's wisdom and knowledge, which is deep and tremendous, but also the moments in history that he participated in at Toyota during some of what I consider to be some really important inflection points in Toyota's history when it was really making, or the leadership was making very intentional decisions about the culture it was developing. For example, Mr. Yoshino's role in the Kan-Pro program at the end of the late '70s and early '80s, which was a way to strengthen management capabilities for the senior management and really, what Mr. Yoshino says is what created and strengthened A3 thinking as the standard management practice—all the way through his role at developing the new retraining program and hiring John Shook and being the model for John Shook's manager character in *Managing to Learn* and more and more.

Katie:
So, these insider's perspectives from someone who was there is so incredible. And Mr. Yoshino really speaks from a place of humility, of not only sharing all of the good experiences and the positive times, but he really was willing to work with me in going deeper into the more challenging times and the times that he might consider a failed outcome. Although he would say it's not a failure if you learn something new and can share and reflect upon that. To be able to offer that to the world is really powerful and special to me, and I'm humbled and honored to be Mr. Yoshino's friend and his partner in creating this book.

Tom:
One of the things that gives this book a lot of grit, in my opinion, is its candor. Mr. Yoshino, you're unafraid to share moments of learning that are not all sugar and sweet and light. You talk about having a bad boss, for example, and you present that as a learning experience. You talk about your work with the water ski boat that didn't take flight. Can you talk about your "failures" or experiences that didn't turn out to be ideal, and yet which were fruitful and productive for you in learning.

Mr. Yoshino:
When Katie started to join me, she came over to Tokyo from Nagoya very often and she started asking many, many, many questions, and I was wondering *why is she asking me so many questions?* Of course, I knew that she was very curious about this crazy guy from Toyota that wanted to go to the U.S., and I

found out that she would like to know the key elements that make me feel happy or make me fail, or what are the learnings that I got out of failure, out of success.

She was interested in learning more about the core things behind all those practices. I was so surprised to find that when she started asking about *What is the cause of the failure?* She would ask, in a nice manner, to go deeper: *what was the cause of the problem? What did you do, why you didn't do that?* This was really the first time in my entire life that somebody else asked *What was the cause of the failure?* Because anybody, nobody wants to talk about your failure, revisit your failure, because it hurts you. But she keeps asking nicely, so it makes me feel very, very good because she's advising me to revisit the time I failed, the time I succeed and try to find the cause of the success, cause of the failure.

Mr. Yoshino:
She's helping out to dig down all those instances. To make a long story short: I started to revisit, and I didn't feel bad when doing so, because I felt very pleased to go back to the failure, and talk about my failure; and Katie and I tried to discover the benefit—the learning I learned from the failure. So that was really the first time I revisited all those core things which made me succeed, made me failure. That is really one of the fantastic moments in our relationship with Katie.

Tom:
In the book, you say "it's only a failure if you don't learn."

Mr. Yoshino:
That's right.

Tom:
I feel like we may be even using that word too often, because this is not a book about "my brilliant failure". Rather, it's very much a book about framing work as experiments that are designed to produce knowledge and personal growth. That's my read of it.
You spend 80 pages talking about trying to develop a water ski boat for Toyota. Can I ask you to summarize that and tell us your learnings from it?

Mr. Yoshino:
Actually I was not a boater, am not a boater even now, but this was another assignment in Toyota's organization. When I joined the marine division, I was trying to find out the purpose of me being assigned: my personal goal. I was not so much interested in the boating business. I didn't see any future success in it.
But then one day I ran into a guy who knew many things about the U.S. and he advised me, "Yoshino-San, do you know that the U.S. boat market is about 30 times as big as the Japanese one? So, you are now trying to find some business chances in that very small, tiny world. You have to know that American boating market is 30 times as big." I did not know that about the water ski boat business.
I did not intentionally start a water ski boat business but I wanted to do something new that would excite me.

Tom:
You wanted to learn?

Mr. Yoshino:

Yes. I wanted to learn something new, I wanted to do something meaningful for me. Then I ran into the idea of water ski boat.
I did not know anything about it. Everything was new to me so no wonder we make a huge amount of mistakes. And that was a very, very good experience for me--to be on the stage that you don't know anything but then you don't get bored. And you try to find something new, something interesting, and you can put all your energy in. That was how I started the boat business scheme. Does it make sense?

Tom:
Yes. And I think one of the things that's really nice about the book is that there's a sense of humility. Of kind of humble inquiry that you and all those working earnestly at Toyota take toward new ventures. Nobody is considered an "expert." Instead there are those that have more experience. And it's this mindset that drives you into new ventures.

Tom:
Katie, can you talk about your mindset, specifically, about what you learned as this process of generating these stories and forming them into a book and familiarizing yourself with the type of culture that Mr. Yoshino worked in and propagated.
What was happening for you in terms of how it shaped your own mindset and attitude?

Katie:
Over the course of the six years that we have been talking and getting to know each other it's been like an onion that we peeled back more and more. I discovered more about concepts that I had known from practicing lean for many years primarily in healthcare organizations and then starting my own consulting practice. I was already grounded in the principles but the nuances and the richness that I discovered through our conversations was really important to me. And even though Mr. Yoshino says this book is not about him, there is something very special about his unique story and experience. And I learned so much about how you really can embody these people-centered leadership practices even in times of challenges. It doesn't mean it's always easy or it comes naturally, but the humility that he shows in sharing that and the reflection in learning and, as he says, relearning more about his life and his leadership style as well.

When we started the concept of writing a book, I originally thought it would be organized thematically, by chapters on a certain topic, perhaps sharing a few stories within that topic. But as we went deeper and deeper into the stories, I realized they fit under one major theme. These experiences go across multiple years, and there's not just one neat leadership lesson in there. And I was really challenging myself about how to tell the story in its completeness, and not fragmented across multiple chapters.

Then I discovered through conversation with Mr. Yoshino the concept of warp and weft—how the two types of thread through weaving is important: the sense of purpose and known things in our life are the strong warp threads, the vertical ones in the loom; and the ones that are discovered and incorporated in a more fluid and changing way represent the things that we discover and learn in our lives. It became clear to me that that was the way to tell the story. I always said to Mr. Yoshino I felt like there are two strong threads in his life.

Katie:
So you have the threads of purpose of becoming, moving to the United States being an international person, having experiences outside of his small community in Japan; and this other one that was really

focused on helping and developing people and learning. And so it was on that frame that I decided to tell the story and when I did, when I sort of shifted my own mindset of what I conceived the book to be and allowed the stories to emerge from there, it actually opened up the telling. But even toward the end, for example the water ski boat experience, Mr. Yoshino and I spent many years diving deeper and deeper into that story because it's very complex and even Mr. Yoshino was having a few new memories even as we were going to press and so.

Tom:
Two quick things: just to edit that story. The warp and weft metaphor has special resonance because of Toyota's history. That before it made cars, it was a textile maker. And you note that in the book.

Katie:
Yeah.

Tom:
It's a great metaphor on page 30 you say, "our fabric of purpose is shaped by the relationship between the known and the discovered" and you explicitly identify them both. One thing I love about the book is that it provides context and color to lean as we know it now in the States. It talks about NUMMI and it talks about our friend John Shook who led LEI and who certainly modeled a character in his book, *Managing to Learn,* on Mr. Yoshino. These two have written stuff for the Lean Post, as have you, Katie, and I had the honor of playing a minor part on *Managing to Learn,* and it was really interesting to work with John because at times he would be confounding, like he would hold things up and it wasn't to hold things up, but it was kind of structured reflection for the group. Where we'd have to examine what we were doing evermore deeply.
Which is I think a long of way of circling back to Mr. Yoshino. Can you talk about ways that you consciously did or learned how to build in hansei, or reflection and learning, into the work of managing and leading others?

Mr. Yoshino:

Within Toyota there were a couple of different cultures, which is different from other companies. One of them is the learning or hansei. Learning come from hansei, first of all. If you make mistakes, then you rewrite what you had done. Many people don't want to just come back, just want to forget about it. People want to try something new without learning some lesson out of their failure. But within Toyota, hansei is so important. It comes back to PDCA, and the process of PDCA: always coming back and checking what I have done, what I have not done and trying to learn something out of that. That is the culture that exists within Toyota.

Mr. Yoshino:
So learning is very, very important, but learning comes from hansei practices. And to practice hansei, you must face the facts of what you have done, and what you have not done, and what could have been done, and all those things. You have to go back to the old history. That is one of the bets aspects of Toyota's management style. Doing this without blaming somebody is one of the things I learned from Toyota. I learned so many things through my career within Toyota, and also through working together for a hundred hours working with Katie.

Tom:

I think that it is uncommon for companies to create cultures where learning is designed in. The default is that failure is looked down upon and not reflected on and people are very instrumentally looking to achieve quick results as easily as possible.

Mr. Yoshino:
Yeah.

Tom:
And I guess it's just another way of asking: what other kind of formal mechanisms can support learning? Obviously, having a Katie asking questions to capture knowledge. But within companies, as opposed to having an abstract culture of learning, what are the kind of most important tools, methods, practices that create a culture of learning and reflection?

Mr. Yoshino:
Well as far as I know, Toyota started as a weaving machine company, but they failed or they had a lot of failures. Even with automobiles. So the top management at the time when I was at Toyota had had a lot of terrible experiences in the past when this started as a small company. They knew how important it is to learn something out of their failure. They determined not to repeat the same stupid things again. Top leaders were serious about learning. Mr. Toyota and all those people were very serious about learning from the past: keeping those memories always in the corner of their mindset, and being careful to not these mistakes again.

That type of mindset remains once it has been fully embraced. Leaders become serious about learning and sharing the experience, and making employees learn something. That type of concept stays for a very long time. Toyota leaders are very, very important. They strive to be humble, to be a good listener, and to be consistent; and also to be ready for learning, and to encourage people to try something new, to learn something, and to not be afraid of making mistakes. That type of culture was created by great top leaders of Toyota.

Tom:
It strikes me that practices or tools such as an A3, which is a very kind of formal tool in one aspect—with the way you fill it out, and have somebody put their personal stamp on it—have clear structures to support learning. The A3 for example is a type of structured storytelling that builds in facts and going to gemba, and it identifies problems as very tangible gaps to be closed. It feels like over the years Toyota developed tools such as A3 and value stream mapping that were very mindful efforts to capture knowledge. That they were a knowledge generating company. I forget how Fujimoto puts it in his book, *The Evolution of A Manufacturing System at Toyota*, that they implemented methods and systems that were more than an abstract desire to learn and reflect. They were part of its effort to develop an evolutionary learning capability.
Does that sound accurate? That you learned very specific ways to operationalize this desire to generate knowledge from experience? Katie, help me out.

Katie:
I've spent hours talking with Mr. Yoshino I have some context that he can follow up with. I would suggest that the A3 process as a thinking and communication process is one of those ways in which Toyota created structures to enable thinking and reflection and the communication of that. And that was part of the experience of Kan-Pro, which John Shook and Mr. Yoshino have written about in the Lean Post, and, of course you can read more details in the book as well. But it was very

intentional, sort of 20 years after the quality circles and the push to what was probably the beginning of lean productions principles were emerging in the '60s, they realized as Mr. Yoshino has shared, that management capabilities were atrophying and that they really needed to put in place structures that would create the habit and the systems for people to communicate.

And that work continued forward. I'll put it back to Mr. Yoshino, maybe reflecting on that time about the process of re-tightening the belt to create systems and processes that supported the types of management capabilities that Toyota wanted to foster at the organization.

Mr. Yoshino:
How do people perceive A3? You know what? In many cases, I believe that many people believe that A3 is a very, very important format, that you have to strictly preserve the style of A3. But within Toyota it's slightly different. A3 is a format that you use to express something. A little bit complicated? Then you have to use A3 because it's a big space. Two times A4 size. You have a lot of space so you can put everything on it. But A3, that's right, that's right, Tom.

Tom:
I just held up a sheet of A3 paper sorry for our listeners.

Mr. Yoshino:
Within Toyota in the '60s, A3 started to develop. Toyota had already started to use A3 before Dr. Deming came in. But A3 is a kind of tool that you can express all the key elements you want to convey on the A3. It's just a tool. So within Toyota we don't have to stick to the A3 formalization too much. If you put everything you believe important into A3, then that is a good size. Because A4 is a smaller size, and two pages of A3 is too big to read...you have one sheet of A3-sized paper. When you give it to somebody then the boss will read from the left upper corner to the right lower corner. A3 is just a format. So when you try to put everything important into A3, you have to go through all the documents, all the evidence, all the data, very seriously whether you should put into the A3 or don't need to put it. You will select only key things to put it in the A3. You do that process before you start writing A3. That process is more important than actually than writing A3. Before you start writing A3, you will do two essays before you start writing. Sorting out what is important, what is less important. So that process is so important.

Tom:
Mr. Yoshino, were you a tough boss? Did you make people write and revise their A3's frequently?

Mr. Yoshino:
Sometimes I did. I'm now writing an A3 document for my university proposal to start some new classes. I would like to supply my colleague professors that A3 is a very good way to discuss only the key things. They are so used to discussing over three, four, five pages of A4, and they end up looking back and forth and getting mixed up, so I would like to show how to keep it simple. Because it's a great tool. And it's so important to prepare, selecting all the key things to include before you write an A3. So that is the purpose of A3, not purpose, that is the beauty of A3. So within Toyota, A3 is so popular, and people are advised to put all the key important things when it's complicated. A3 is recommended because it's a great tool to help you learn how to select important things from less important things. It's a very important tool to select key things. So, writing A3 is a result of those practices. I believe those practices selecting important things and those practices may be more important than writing A3.

Tom:
Well, how do I say this? It says to me that the ways of capturing knowledge are simple conceptually. That at their heart, essentially they're simple.

Mr. Yoshino:
Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Tom:
And yet they're challenging to execute, and they require many iterations and experiments, and I'm not going to say failures, but drafts and iterations. I'm going to say that because I'm going to circle back to the book. Even the book itself is a specific way of capturing a wealth of knowledge and putting it into a format that people can learn the tools, reflect on them, and apply them.

So with that, I'm going to give a very gracious thank you to Katie Anderson and Mr. Isao Yoshino. Thank you both for coming on this podcast.

Mr. Yoshino:
It's my pleasure.

Katie:
Thanks so much, Tom.