



Transcript for the WLEI Podcast:

Coachable: A Model Story, Coaching Work Improvement

January 27, 2020

Featuring: [Deborah McGee](#) and Bryant Sanders

Deb

To set things up, in the last conversation I had about coaching, we talked about the importance of creating the environment, coaching in the environment where the work happens. And Bryant, you were recently onsite at this organization coaching. And we received, back at the office we received pictures from the field about this coaching as it was evolving. So the story kind of unfolded for us and it was a really interesting story, compelling story. And I wanted to try and share it with our listeners. And one of my first questions is Bryant, when you went to this team and you went to this company, how did you go about deciding what area to work in, where to focus?

Bryant

With this particular project we spent a lot of time considering the company's role and what impact it would have to the layers of the organization's supply chain. So one of the things the company had asked us was, "How do we work through the layers of our supply chain, really where the value is being added?" And the business need from the company was to look at how can they shrink and reduce the lead time to bring closure to their projects so they can serve their customers quicker.

Bryant

And so then that lead to a discussion around what is the bulk of the work with the characteristics of work that's repeatable that we can examine and look deeply into at the job site. And that lead to investigating where do we have a good pairing in the supply chain. Maybe with some of the ... Without getting into too much detail. Some of the partners had some understanding of [inaudible 00:14:07] so that we weren't educating directly from the beginning.

Bryant

But still needed help to break through how to become more efficient. And so we examined the different possibilities, and we landed a particular job site. And at that job site we were able to ask some key questions about this kind of what is the bulk of the work. What element of the job site here does the work consist most of, and it lead to work in the area of electrical installation trade.

Bryant

And then when we examined further, we actually then went to the work site and said, "Okay, let's look at some of these, the work that's actually happening." And we landed on two areas to focus and so in the first area that we really examined was an area where we found several workers participating in a team to accomplish the end task of installing electrical bus rail.

Bryant

And so this key lend itself to a good kind of field to learn, a good setting to learn. Because it required us to look at multiple jobs of multiple people doing different jobs and then how to coordinate that work. And so that's lending itself to the thinking of the meaning of standardized work combination table or standardized work combination.

Bryant

So how do we combine the work of different people, coordinate it, synchronize so that we can work efficiently? And so that is how we landed in the one area, in the electrical bus installation area.

Bryant

The other area we found just by was electrical termination and this is where in a power distribution panel, the electrical connectors are ... A term lug is placed on the end and then it's placed in the power distribution panel, and tightened to make sure that there's good conductivity for electrical distribution. And this was area was determined because given the scope of the site, there are thousands of these terminations that would be required in order to bring closure to the project and get

the facility up in serving the customers, our clients, customers. And so it was a kind of a natural based on that original criteria, but also the amount of work and repeatable type of work that would exist.

Deb

Thank you. So you were, and it's not like you spent your life in this line of work, so you didn't know the nuance of the work. But you were looking for certain characteristics of repeatable work that were impactful to the lead time. And so that through following that compass, right. That led you to these two different areas of focus.

Bryant

Yes. Well, it is the ... So being in this line of work and having look, examine the work, what I realized that overs when we do work, either service work or manufacturing work. If we're producing a product serving hamburgers at McDonald's, over a period of time we'll see some pattern of repeatability. So I would say that we can say all work is repeatable. But the other factor was, how much of this work contributes to the lead time at this particular site?

Bryant

So for example, given that this is in the construction industry, pouring the foundation of the building would happen basically one time. So although if we were to go to another site, we would pour the foundation. But at this particular site, the electrical work would happen in many different, several, hundreds of times, thousands of times. In order to propose the project, we have to get all of those thousands of cycles to work completely, if that makes sense.

Deb

Yeah, that does make sense. And I know a lot of times when we think about what problem do we want to solve, I think there's a skill and an art to picking the right problem to solve. To being effective in what you're choosing to work with. Now Mark shared with us as a way of sort of orienting us in what the job was, a job instruction sheet. Actually it's a job breakdown sheet. And one of the things I'm curious about

was did that already exist, or was that something that you put together with the team as a way to better understand the work once you chose your area of focus?

Bryant

Well, the interesting thing, so the job breakdown sheet is associated, it's one of the outcomes of our work associated with the bus rail installation. So as we examine that work, again, the bus rail installation, there are about 10 people initially that were working together in a way that those included a lot of excess motion handling, a lot of convenience and really a lot of waiting.

Bryant

And so when we looked at that work, we have to think about where is ... How do we choreograph this work in a way that the workers can work together simultaneously? And so that we can reduce the waiting and if even if possible, reduce the amount of the people who are doing the work. So the job breakdown sheet has now growth as we looked at the work and say, "Okay, when ..." Because we have to choreograph more than one person, where's the work being bottlenecked? And what we found was that we, as we looked at multiple cycles of work, we found that when different team members would do a particular job, the amount of time it would take that team member to do the ... In that particular job was the coupling installation.

Bryant

When the amount of time it would take one team member versus another was dramatically different. And so this is where we had to begin to work to take some of the, what we would call fluctuation out of the work so that we can get a better baseline. And so in order to do that, what we realized is we needed to be able to convey in a very clear and concise and the reasons why the specific job steps in doing the coupling installation.

Bryant

And so we examine that work, we study that work with the person who could do the job repeatably without much fluctuation and we work with that person to really understand what steps they were taking to do the work. What were the kind of key points or methods or what we call them, maybe knacks associated with doing the

work. And then what are some of the key reasons why for each of those, so that we could capture that in a way so that we can begin to take that information and began to transfer that to the other members to be able to reduce their time when they did that same job.

Deb

It's wonderful, wonderful. So a nice good solid first step is taking a good careful observation of the work and applying that, putting that down on a job breakdown sheet. Not as a prescription, but it is the first step that you took here to sort of stabilize the important steps. The key points or the knack and the reasons why. Yeah?

Bryant

Yeah. So we couldn't get the next level of improvement without passing through this point of stabilization as you described. So we would have been basically running in circles. Because the bottleneck would have moved as people rotated across the work. And so our aim was to, this element is taking long when this person does the job. So we had to ask, is it a really skill level or does the person know, do they not know? Or how do we get them to understand a better way without being offensive to the knowledge that they do have?

Deb

That's right.

Bryant

So how do we get them to get that exposure? And so the job breakdown sheet and working with the members documented took the kind of the ... Took the emotion out of and made it kind of plain and practical. Especially being able to express the reasons why.

Deb

It's wonderful. And then the next sort of thing we had back at LEI as the story was unfolding for us was a picture, an image of two workers and one of them working and one of them coaching. And I'm curious to know what the relationship was

between those two people. If it was a supervisor and an operator or if they were peers or if it mattered I guess.

Bryant

The interesting thing as we engage the team at this particular, at this site, as we engage the team, our approach. They saw us observing their work initially, and we spoke with all of the layers of the organization, from the executive leader to the foreman, to the supervisor and then to the foreman. And we expressed what our intentions were as we originally arrived on the site.

Bryant

But our methodology of identifying hard work and difficult work and giving if you will, a gift back and fixing those issues real time, give back to the team members who are doing the work more quickly allowed us to have a very meaningful engagement. So then very quickly we crossed through the threshold that they found we weren't a threat to bring harm to the work that we were doing. But in fact reduce some of the burden and struggles that they were having in their work.

Bryant

And so as we work with the members, it really fostered teamwork amongst the group. Because remember, as I indicated when we arrived there were originally about 10 people who were working in the area. We believe that most people when they come to work, they come to work to do a good job. And so when you have 10 people and many of them are standing around, they don't feel like they're contributing and being valuable.

Bryant

And so as we begin to do the work and we begin to coordinate and synchronize the work in a way that people could work together and we get the job done faster, then the spirit of teamwork begin to take over. And so these two that we see in the picture here, they're colleagues and they are not supervisor and team member or team leader and team member. They are the same peers.

Deb

Was there anything special about these two that you chose to pair together or to walk through the job breakdown in action together?

Bryant

Well the again, so what we saw in fact, so this is one of the ... As we talk about the theme about coaching realtime in the work this allowed us to see as we were right there in the midst of the work, we could see the skill gap. And we can ask many questions around why this skill gap occur? These two peers, they're working in the same area, trying to accomplish the same task even as the team. And so, but there's skill [inaudible 00:27:28], the existing skill difference. Keep up that know-how difference.

Bryant

So why does that happen? So instead of branching off and beginning to chase some kind of training program on the wall and look in the classroom. Our approach was, let's try to measure the skill gap now by developing the job breakdown sheet. And having the more skilled member provide their know-how and coaching support to the other member so that we can arrange the level of skill and move on with improving the work, stabilizing and improving.

Deb

One of the things I absolutely love about this example is that this is not a picture of you or Mark standing next to that person telling them what to do or advising them. You kindled that spirit of teamwork and the subject matter experts were actually doing the coaching. I think that's wonderful because we talk about wanting to build capability versus create dependency.

Deb

And just working through the team members, establishing that trust through your dispassionate investigation and giving an offering to create engagement, focusing on the work, not the worker. And are really kindling that spirit of teamwork so that they are learning from one another through you. That's really special. Would these two

normally be doing their own work? So they'd be separately accomplishing their own tasks in their own ways?

Bryant

Yes. Well when we arrived, what we found is they're making ... Again, people are making their best efforts if they see to do their work, they ... But no one was really looking into their work to see, okay, is there a better way for this to be happening? And so they're trying to get the job done, practicing the level of safety, practicing the level of quality to the best of their know-how. But no one's asking, in this industry, it's if you walk on the one of these job sites, you'll see it's like people standing around frequently.

Deb

Yes.

Bryant

Why is that? Why is that? So it's like the norm. So when you see the people waiting, no one is asking, is there a way that they can be doing other work that contributes to move the project forward. It seems to be kind of like the norm. But as we communicated our intent and our own purpose and begin to engage the members reducing their ... Taking some of their difficulties out of the way, moving things closer to the point of views. Then they begin to see themselves, "Oh we can do this. Well what about if we did this?"

Bryant

And so again, that spirit of teamwork took over and they begin to work together. And we aided with some of the things that we know from our experience, tools that would help them. The job breakdown sheet, standardized work combination table to help them visualize and capture some key points to help transfer the know-how. Otherwise they would be working in the same area, but not necessarily optimizing the power that they have as a team.

Deb

That's amazing, yeah. One of the questions I had is, as the one gentleman was coaching the other, did you observe that person's coaching or coaching technique or find that person overextending, or doing too much directing versus asking? Or did you offer coaching points to that person, or how did you shape their ability to coach the other person? How did he do that?

Bryant

So one of the tools that we use from time to time, especially in this case, it was pretty effective, is we use the video that we captured and observe and we shared that back with the coach. And that also helped in developing the job breakdown sheet. And so the coach didn't realize, "Okay, what are those key points that I need to convey."

Bryant

But then we also show the other member the video of themselves as well. So they now use the videos like a mirror so that the ... Given the two individuals, the individuals who was had some difficulty, struggling doing the job, they could see that themselves in a way that the video is showing a mirror. So it took the ... So this allowed the person who is acting as a coach, it allowed them to talk directly to the issues and the reasons why, the key points and the reasons why.

Deb

Amazing.

Bryant

We didn't offer any specific method or technique in this particular case about bringing, as we would do in typical job instruction.

Deb

So just basically creating the conditions that someone can offer their expertise, their wisdom, their experience to someone less experienced. And then giving them a way to self-reflect I guess, right? Was that part of the ... After the coaching session, did

you all come back together and sit down and watch that video or was it given to them one on one in their own time?

Bryant

We brought them together and watched the video.

Deb

Yeah. Was there any resistance?

Bryant

Yes. [crosstalk 00:33:50]. So it created that self-reflecting environment. Again, due to our earlier work, we took the edge off of the creating this environment that we are there threatening, or trying to force work, trying to make things go faster just to go faster. We took that edge off and we got the good teamwork engagement. And so this also have been facilitated, the good environment for self-reflection.

Deb

That's wonderful. It's a really light touch, right? It's not so much, there's nothing forced about this. It just builds, getting that trust built early and establishing yourself as genuinely helpful. Offering them something really lets the rest of the day unfold it seems like.

Bryant

So the framework that we approach, the leadership of the company wouldn't ... Let's go take a look at your work site and as you examine your work site, you may have been ... This will be the kind of words we use with them. You may have already been exposed to the term lean and what lean means and this thinking about there's waste and the seven type of waste.

Bryant

But what we'd like to expose you to is not the content of the work in terms of the ... In within all people's work there is a waste, there's value added work and then there's incidental work, but that we can visit, that's the content of the work. But

what is the characteristic of the work? There's work that is wasteful, there's work that is uneven, and then there's work that's difficult, overburden.

Bryant

And this perspective is how we coach the leadership to see. And so when we coach the leadership that way, it became much less difficult or became more meaningful when we engage the staff. Because the leadership begin to see where this hard work was. And that's where we begin to take action. And then that's what created the field of trust that we could work together.

Deb

Amazing. Thank you Bryant, there was a dramatic improvement in the work and I wonder, I mean I suspect that ... So the report that came back to us was reduced the work from 103 minutes to four minutes and that's drastic. And I wondered if there were maybe some components that were taken away from the work that allowed that type of improvement? Or maybe you can share with us a little bit more context around that 103 minutes to four minutes.

Bryant

Whatever. What I will tell you in this particular example, it was painful to watch, to observe the total amount of time of observation of 283 minutes. Where we were watching a journeyman began to prepare his wires for termination inside of a power distribution panel. It was painful to watch. There were two and a half inch in diameter, aluminum cable. They were clustered together. There are eight of them clustered together, and the journeymen had to strip the casing from these wires at the top of this cabinet. And so it was just painful to watch, to know that he would spend the majority of his day up and down the ladder, his torso inside of a cabinet to remove the casings around each of these wires.

Deb

Wow. Yeah.

Bryant

So you know, there had to be a better way. There had to be a better way. And so in fact, as you say, with their work taken away, oh yeah, the work was taken away. Oftentimes when we look at work and when we see these kind of dramatic improvements, it's usually not a change in the work itself. It's a change in the sequence of work. So in this particular case, that's exactly what yielded the improvement or benefit.

Bryant

So what we did in the site with the members is before we insert this cable into the power distribution panel, through the top of the power distribution panel, is it possible that we can cut around the perimeter diameter of the cable, strip the casing, and then insert the cable into the power distribution panel? Yes, we could do that. Yes, that's possible. Yes, that's possible. Then why aren't we doing that?

Bryant

So in fact, these are, and I wish I was sent the video. Just that alone took 30 seconds.

Deb

Wow. Wow.

Bryant

Just that alone. So if we did this work outside of the cabinet, outside of its very difficult environment that we created, that was created because the wires all clustered together in the top of this power distribution tower. So we had then had to get with the rest of the team and to really understand if this has better, this is so much easier, or it can be done so much easier, more safely and quicker outside of the panel. Why isn't being done? You all are smart people. There must be a very meaningful reason why you're not doing it this way. And something we had to begin to explore, okay.

Deb

Yes, yes.

Bryant

We went on then to explore. What we found in doing it there ... For a very practical reason, given the nature and the power, the amount of volts is flowing through these cables. The outer cable sheath is about an eighth of an inch thick. It has to be removed in order to get access to the conductors or the windings that are inside the cable. So those cables then can be terminated inside the cabinet.

Bryant

Well, given the amount of power flowing through these cables, if the wrapping of the coating of these interior connectors are damaged, the power will seek to find his leak the least path of resistance. And it's quite possible that we could get a short circuit, if you will. Power will flow outside this damaged casing and then it'll interrupt the ... create a problem and interrupt the powerful distribution. So they have to take great care of protecting these, the coatings of these internal connection.

Bryant

And so there [inaudible 00:41:39] come sharp services along the path that these cables are pulled through constructors and through the what they call cable trays and into the cabinet. And so they have to take great care not to damage those cable, the interior cable rapids. So that was the reason why they had enough experience to know if they damaged it then they had to pull out the whole run. And that was very, very time consuming and it's another waste of rework and repair.

Deb

Yeah, expensive too.

Bryant

They didn't want to do that. And expensive, yeah. So this was the reason, and the weight behind the reason why they wanted to keep the sheath on.

Deb

So were you able to still find a way to take that sheath off before putting it into the confines or the constraints of the cabinet without worrying about damaging the wire?

Bryant

The beauty in this case is that once it was realized how much time that this was taking, then we begin to enlist the ideas of the supplier team. So the way the work was being done is that we had a team that was pulling the tables to the distribution panel, and they are responsible for inserting the cable into the panel. And then we had another team that's responsible for completing the terminations, stripping the sheaths and preparing the wires. But once we enlisted the idea, that once we shared the problem with the supplying team, the one that was supplying the cable to the power distribution panel. Then we began to get some ideas about how can we change the sequence of work, and also protect the cables.

Bryant

And even within, once we shared the problem with the team. Well, I would say within two or three hours experiments began to happen of, maybe we can just cut around what we call the perimeter of the cable, which is the most difficult part of the work when it's up in the cabinet, maybe we can cut around that on the outside, but leave the sheath on as we stick it down through the distribution panel-

Deb

Yes.

Bryant

... protecting the interior wires.

Bryant

Yeah, so as the team worked, they experimented several different experiments. One was they cut around up to the perimeter and they cut down the entire sheath basically leaving the internal cables as meat in a taco, if you will. So you have the outer shell and then they, okay, let's try this. But then what they found was that the sheath would come loose and it would separate. So that wasn't a good kind of counter measure. So then they tried again, okay, let's cut around the edge. Now let's duct tape where we've cut and cut down the sheath. Okay, let's see what happens there. And still this kind of loose condition of the sheath, didn't work well. And so

finally, what they ended up with out of their experiment is that they would cut around the perimeter of the sheath, they would duct tape it, and then they would insert it into the cabinet. And then they would do their final slip of the entire sheath after they did the insertion of the cable. So in our early experiments, it got down to four minutes, but we actually ended up a result of 24 minutes.

Deb

Which from 283 to 24, still amazing.

Bryant

Amazing, amazing. But it was looking at the hard work. What's difficult? Why does a person spend all of their day with this struggle? Because of what's creating this hard work, can we change the work sequence involving the supplying team and then begin to experiment. Go through different cycles of what are we going to do? What are we trying to achieve, now let's try it. Let's see how it works. We did this.

Deb

I'm sorry, please go. And we did this.

Bryant

And so then we did this within two days. One, maybe three days, one day observing, two days investigate, one day, maybe half day of investigating and then another day and a half of experimentation and developing a standard of practice.

Deb

This is amazing. And none of it was you figuring out the grand solution ahead of time and backing them into it in any way. I love that the improvement began with a question. I think you said like, "What if we?" Or "Why don't we?" I think it was what if, what if? And then the further investigation about, well why isn't it done that way now? Respecting the fact that there must be a reason. And then this word that you used, we enlisted the ideas of the supplier.

Deb

So all of this came from the team and from the work. And it's just remarkable to me that this level of improvement in this short amount of time with this level of engagement is completely possible because of the way that you went about it. And it's this way of going about things. And I wonder, there's no way I don't think that you could have arrived at a solution like this or a counter measure like this, right, in a classroom. It had to happen right there in the moment. In the work. Yeah?

Bryant

Yeah. So one of the amazing things is that because of what we saw when we explained and shared our observations, those who were in the classroom for example, was just shaking their heads like, "We can't believe that that's the way it's been done."

Deb

That's right. You had the video.

Bryant

Yeah. But in fact, we're not making the [inaudible 00:48:21], this is the way it's been done.

Deb

Wow.

Bryant

And so what I think my kind of amazing it is that, and it's the meaning of learning to see, I think. The meaning of being able to see the work. We walk by every day, the foreman in this area walk by every day. Superintendent in this area walk by every day. There are 48 of these cabinets on this particular site where this work was happening, was going to happen this exact same way. Oh, matter of fact they had already completed 11 cabinets this exact same way. In the condition that we had found earlier. That was their practice. But as you indicated, there was a reason why. I mean, they understood, if they damaged those internal connectors, the [inaudible 00:49:17], there was going to be a big problem.

Deb

Yeah.

Bryant

But thinking through with the team, but what can we do? What can be done? And how can we test it? Not leave it for tomorrow, but how can we experiment even with our next pool? Cable pool. How can we drive [inaudible 00:49:36].

Deb

What's exciting to me is the way that you went about experimentation and how you had such an incredible four minute success on your first experiment. But how you continued to go at that a little bit and really take a critical look at the experiment you ran and the outcome you got and whether or not it satisfied the safety criteria and all the criteria. And it seems just very thorough to me how you went through those iterations of experiments. And I imagine that might have been something new for them, is to try it this way. Okay, try it this way, try it this way and go through those reflections. And is there anything about the technique of leading people through experimentation that might be helpful for people to hear?

Bryant

What I will say is that, let me just speak to me and my past history. So sometimes as an engineer, my orientation is, we can engineer this perfectly. But experimentation really is about exploring and learning and then really having some surprises. Discovering things that we didn't anticipate. And what I would say is that sometimes we just have to let things happen, and we can learn by those surprises. But if we tried to corral more tightly and engineer the outcome, maybe it takes away from this kind of what I'm going to call free learning or the value that we get by the freedom in learning, if that makes sense.

Deb

That makes sense, total sense. Yeah.

Bryant

So what I would say to people is, "Let's understand the purpose of the work. What is it we're trying to accomplish? Let's give it our best thought to how we can go about setting up some test that would give us some predictable outcome or what we predict the outcome. And then let's try, but let's not worry and spend the time and energy trying to control to the point to ensure that we get this outcome that we engineered to be able to tell a good story. But let's not worry about telling the story, but let's worry about getting an outcome that's meaningful, sustainable and suitable that the people who are actually doing the work can sustain."

Deb

It's beautiful. It's beautiful. I thank you so much Bryant. I think this is a really exciting and compelling story and I can't wait to share it. I also think that by listening to this, I have a different way of going about something that I was going to try with some other people. And so I hope that the takeaway for people who listen to this broadcast is different ways to go about improvement and coaching. And make it less about the title and the job description of coaching and more about the actual work and the people doing it. I love it. Is there anything else before we close? Is there anything else that you wanted to touch on that we didn't hear today?

Bryant

No, I think that all work as I indicated in the beginning, all work has some level of repeatability. I think for the people who are actually doing the work, who are adding the value, respecting their time and their effort. And that what they're doing is so very important to help check our eyes as we go to see their work. Their struggles and their difficulties are real. It is what cause them to have sore hands and sore backs and sore legs when they come home. And so to respect their work, for us to improve their work, to remove those difficulties are really our way to show our respect for them and the work that they do. And so I would want people to have that kind of mind and appreciation for those who add value to the work.

Deb

That's wonderful. Well thank you Bryant. I can't thank you enough. This was a really great way to start the day. I appreciate your time and I can't wait to share this with everyone.

Bryant

Okay, Thank you.

*Listen to new episodes of **WLEI** every Monday on your favorite podcast apps. We invite your thoughts and experiences about coaching and being coached: email your stories! pod@lean.org.*