

PODCAST 187: LEADERSHIP IN HEALTHCARE KAIZEN

By Mark Graban



Joe Swartz,
Administrative Director of
Business Transformation
Improvement for Franciscan
Alliance, Inc.
Co-author of Healthcare Kaizen
www.hckaizen.com.org

The Franciscan St. Francis Health-Indianapolis campus will be the site of the Main Kaizen Live! workshop. Joe Swartz and I will be hosting on May 24-25. Please visit www.kaizenlive.com for more information.

In episode 187 of the Lean Blog Podcast, I had the pleasure of speaking to my good friend, Joe Swartz. At the time of our interview Joe was the Director of Business Transformation at Franciscan St. Francis Health System in Indianapolis, and has since been promoted to the Administrative Director of Business Transformation of Franciscan Alliance. He was also my co-author on two books, *Healthcare Kaizen: Engaging Front-Line Staff in Sustainable Continuous Improvements* and *The Executive Guide to Healthcare Kaizen: Leadership for a Continuously Learning and Improving Organization*.

You can learn more about those titles at www.hckaizen.com.

“I remember one place in particular just blew me away, we went to the Cadillac plant in Livonia, Michigan”

Joe and I also share a background in engineering before coming to Lean.

“After a while working in engineering, I got an inkling to work with teams, and my dad had been consulting for a number of years, so I asked him to kind of take me

out on the road and show me what he does. He took me to a few places, and I remember one place in particular just blew me away, we went to the Cadillac plant in Livonia, Michigan,” Joe said, explaining with enthusiasm how the plant had cut down a process to bring parts from the supplier and onto the engine from 20 steps down to five.

“But another piece of that whole puzzle was the people, I saw lots of enthusiasm, lots of engagement, I saw a joy at work there at Cadillac, and Dad took me to a few other places where I didn’t see that, and they struggled. So I knew there

was a clear difference, whatever they were doing there at Cadillac I needed to learn more about.”

Following that trip, Joe’s father gave him a book, called *Transforming the Workplace*, which spoke about idea systems and what Toyota, Honda, and Nissan had done, in contrast to American companies, in engaging the human element while balancing it with technical solutions. This book intrigued Joe and he asked his father what he would have to do to get into that kind of work, to which his father suggested he go back to school. Joe didn’t hesitate, and earned a Masters Degree in Management from Purdue University.

“On graduation day, I called him and said, ‘Dad, I’m ready!’” Joe explained with a laugh. “He said, ‘Ok, let me line up some work for you.’ So the first job we got was in General Motors. I learned a lot through that experience, we worked at the engine engineering plant in Michigan, and we redesigned how engineers engineered their product, which taught me a lot about innovation and creativity, and how people work together to produce good concepts.”

After that experience, Joe worked in a number of other settings with his father including engineering, manufacturing, semiconductor plants, pharmaceuticals, metal forming, automotive, aerospace. Joe said that he learned a lot through all of it, but one that stood out was Spraying Systems, a metal forming plant in Chicago that makes spray nozzles.

“There, we experimented on how to engage all employees. The president there really pushed the engagement of all employees, he

wanted all employees engaged in implementing Lean, and was very knowledgeable about Lean. So we ended up teaching lots of concepts about Lean and employees how to implement those.”

“I knew from my previous experiences, Livonia and the company in Chicago, Spraying Systems, that at some point I needed to engage all employees to really get my job done.”

Getting into Healthcare

Around 2005, Joe transitioned into healthcare, once again coinciding with my own career path, which was leading me to get started in healthcare at about the same time. For Joe, the transition began when some Purdue professors were helping St. Francis hospital get started with a Lean Six Sigma program. The professors were knowledgeable about Six Sigma, but were looking for someone who knew Lean. Joe filled that gap and the team worked on bringing their program not only to St. Francis hospital, but to all the Franciscan Alliance hospitals in Indiana and Illinois.

After about nine months, St. Francis offered to hire him as an employee and Joe eagerly said yes. Not long after that, Joe and I were introduced through Norman Bodek, who knew we were both working in healthcare.

Engaging All Employees

“I knew from my previous experiences, Livonia and the company in Chicago, Spraying Systems, that at some point I

needed to engage all employees to really get my job done,” Joe said. “We were doing Lean Six Sigma projects at the time and we could do maybe 10 a year, and you can engage 15-25 people per project, I looked out to the future and it would take 20 years or 30 years to reach every employee. So I really needed something that would engage every employee, starting right away.”

Joe said that he took the concepts in Norm’s book *The Idea Generator*, which spelled out how to dramatically simplify engaging an employee, and tried to simplify them even further. In April of 2007, Joe brought Norm in to meet with senior management for an hour and then have him speak to a larger group of about 250 people, for three hours about what “Quick and Easy Kaizen” is all about. These talks kicked off St. Francis’ Kaizen program, which launched the next day.

Creating Change on All Levels

I have been continually impressed with the commitment of leadership and the success, at all levels, the Franciscan St. Francis Health System has had, so I asked Joe what his favorite types of successes and improvements that people are making through the Kaizen process.

One type of improvement that Joe said was his favorite is the simple improvements made at the beginning of the process. Joe explained that he asks all employees to begin with something they can control themselves, rather than trying to change other people. Once they’ve gotten better, then they can move on to changing the workplace, patient, and hospital.

One of Joe's favorite examples of a Kaizen that created change on many levels is called Bubbles for Babies, which took place early in the program. Bubbles for Babies is a program where small containers of bubble solution are provided to parents who blow bubbles to distract young children when they are having an ultrasound.

"That one's really special because it shows how something that's good for our patients can be good for the families, and it can be good for our workers. It made the experience of ultrasound more enjoyable for the worker, and I was really searching for joy at work," Joe said. "[It] was good for the organization too, because it shortened the procedure time by making a baby have a great experience. And it was good for society in general. So, it was good on so many different levels."

"The departments that do really well are run by leaders who are passionate about Kaizen. Anything they do to drive home the importance of Kaizen, and message it back to their employees drives Kaizen. If the employees see managers making it important, it's important to staff."

Joe regularly chooses notable Kaizens, like Bubbles for Babies, and communicates them back to staff. He chooses Kaizens that carry the message of combining good for staff, good

for patients, good for families, good for the community, and good for the hospital. Joe said that after awhile, staff really began to pick up on what type of Kaizen is really celebrated and began submitting more Kaizens of that type. The effect has been the culture shift toward improvement that is needed.

Joe also contributed leadership to the success of culture change, saying, "The departments that do really well are run by leaders who are passionate about Kaizen. Anything they do to drive home the importance of Kaizen, and message it back to their employees drives Kaizen. If the employees see managers making it important, it's important to staff," Joe said. "They're always asking, and messaging, and making it a priority in their agenda; they're always talking about it."

Kaizen and the Role of Management

While constant communication is important for Kaizen, when I asked Joe about the role of the manager in helping the employee implement Kaizen, it brought an example to his mind. Joe said that, a few months before our interview, he had a new manager come to him to raise concerns about the amount of time Kaizen was demanding of her, as it was taking up about one day in each week. When Joe questioned her about the problem, it became clear that she was following up with each Kaizen herself.

"What you got to do is turn that around. As manager, you shouldn't take on any of the work, you should coach them, for them to take on the work. So after she shifted that back onto them,

it freed up all kinds of time for her to focus on the future and it empowered the employees to figure out how to do the work," Joe said. "It's a little rough at first, but they learn; and this is all about developing people. We're developing a culture of continuous improvement."

"If the manager can trust the process and find the time for staff somehow, it might take a couple of months, but they will start to find that there's extra time for people to work on stuff like this. I've seen it in department, after department, after department, at our hospital and other hospitals that have adopted this."

Joe said the managers who are able to coach their staff to do the work of improvement themselves all find that they have more time to focus on what they should be focusing on, which is developing the future. He also said that while staff time to do the work of each Kaizen may at first be tight, he also finds that time opens up for staff, as well.

"If the manager can trust the process and find the time for staff somehow, it might take a couple of months, but they will start to find that there's extra time for people to work on stuff like this. I've seen it in department, after department, after department, at our hospital and other hospitals that have adopted this," Joe said.

Continuous Improvement and Executives

Having been impressed with the implementation and culture development at St. Francis, and to touch on the themes in our book *The Executive Guide to Healthcare Kaizen: Leadership for a Continuously Learning and Improving Organization*, I asked Joe what key things his senior leaders do to foster the culture of Continuous Improvement. He said that his leaders believe in it and convey that belief through their messaging.

"Our CEO, at one of the recent all-employee meetings, I counted and I think it was five times that he mentioned Kaizen. So it's still important to them, and they convey that," Joe said. "And they give us time they give me and my

staff time at important meetings to talk about Kaizen. They still fund the program, they give our staff some of the best and the brightest in the organization to work in our department. And they allow us to experiment, we're still trying new things and learning new things."

"Really it's all about creating that culture, so doing whatever it takes to create that culture where all our employees are engaged everyday in the search, the search for how do we make this better, how do we this little thing better, and this little thing better."

To wrap up, I asked Joe what he anticipates doing in the future to increase participation. Joe said that he keeps it positive, not talking about the low-performers, but lifting the high-performers and departments up to keep the momentum and energy high.

"Really it's all about creating that culture, so doing whatever it takes to create that culture where all our employees are engaged everyday in the search, the search for how do we make this better, how do we this little thing better, and this little thing better," Joe said. "And that is going to make us much more competitive, make everybody's job more secure, and provide better care for our patients and their families, which is what we're all really trying to do."



www.leanblog.org
www.markgraban.com

CONNECT WITH MARK GRABAN



facebook.com/mark.graban



[@MarkGraban](https://twitter.com/MarkGraban)



linkedin.com/in/mgraban



youtube.com/user/mgraban