

## PODCAST 275: OBSERVING LEAN IN JAPAN

By Mark Graban



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*In a recent article, titled  
If You Think Lean Is  
Inherently Japanese,  
Think Again Katie  
Anderson discusses  
her observations and  
experiences as a Lean  
professional living in Japan.*

The last time I interviewed Katie Anderson, in episode 233, she spoke to me from her then-home office in Tokyo. Here in episode 274, Katie spoke to me from California, having wrapped up her 18-month-long stay in Japan. In that first interview, Katie shared some stories and thoughts about her visits, networking, and experiences in Japan. This time, she was able to share some reflections from her entire time there.

“We’ve been back about six months now. The reflections I have, are not that different from

what I had after the first six months. They’re just more deeply enriched from having more experiences. The last six months that we were living in Japan, I had accelerated opportunities for going out to go see and connecting with people,” Katie said. “The experiences I have just confirmed some of the initial experiences and observations I was making around not only Japanese culture but around what we consider Lean thinking and practice in the western world.”

Katie recently published an article titled *If You Think Lean Is Inherently*

*Japanese, Think Again* based on some of her experiences, which you can read at [planet-lean.com](http://planet-lean.com).

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As she explained, Katie used the trip to Japan not only as an opportunity for her own learning, as she has been a Lean coach and consultant for over 10 years primarily in

healthcare, but sharing that learning with other people through blogging.

Today, Katie runs her own Lean coaching and consulting practice and teaches some courses for Catalysis (formerly the ThedaCare Center for Healthcare Value), as well as the Lean Enterprise Institute.

“For me, one of the biggest takeaways, [was the wrong assumption] I and many other people have about Japan being much more Lean thinking in totality than it actually is. Lean culture or Lean thinking is not the same as Japanese culture and Japanese thinking. Although there are some things that are common and make the Toyota Production System easier, there are many cultural traits, or human traits, in Japan that actually seem to run counter to what we might consider Lean thinking. I thought that was very interesting as a Lean practitioner.”

### **Kata and Lean**

One concept present in everyday life in Japan that runs counter to Lean thinking, in a way, is “kata,” Katie explained; kata being the practice of detailed choreographed patterns of movement observed either solo or in pairs.

“There are kata for everything in Japan, from exchanging your business cards, to how a sumo match is conducted, to who sits where at a business meeting or in a taxi. The deep level of apprenticeship to learn the kata, the craftsmanship, culture that exists out there,” Katie said.

“Typical Japanese businesses are not Lean thinking [businesses]. People look to the leader to have the answer and start follow whatever is happening, what the leader says.”

Being willing to follow a “kata” (or “standardized work”) is a good thing, but not if people are unwilling to try to improve the way the work is done. Toyota and Lean emphasizes not just following a process, but also working to continuously improve it, through the practice of “kaizen.”

***“We all have different limiting cultural and human traits that we need to overcome in service of delivering better value to our customers, or in healthcare to our patients. It’s not necessarily Japan that’s perfect on this; in the Western world things that are challenging for Japanese may be more easy for, say, someone in the US and vice versa.”***

Katie pointed out how Toyota has been able take this limiting cultural trait, which has a reliance on hierarchy and on looking to leaders for the all the answers, and change it into the apprenticeship model wherein leaders become coaches and teachers for the people working with them and below them.

### **Fear of Failure**

Another limiting cultural trait that Katie touched on was the fear of failure.

“Failure is not seen as OK. You want to be perfect. You want to have what’s outwardly projected to be perfect. People are less willing to take risks,” Katie said. “Tied to that too, is also

following the rules and what was weighed out, not necessarily thinking outside the box...and not challenging the status quo.”

Katie and I both spoke about examples of organizations in Japan that were finding success from creating a culture that’s willing to take risks, and how culture can differ from one organization to the next, even within the same industry, like automotive.

“Something else I’ve been reflecting on lately is that when Taiichi Ohno and other Toyota leaders were starting to bring in what is now known as the Toyota Production System and the Toyota Way, they were really just dealing with the human traits, cultural traits or just specific human traits, that they saw in front of them that were barriers to innovation and to problem solving thinking. That was their current condition to improve. These same principles around TPS are really the best of the Western management thinking and Japanese management thinking combined,” Katie said. “We all have different limiting cultural and human traits that we need to overcome in service of delivering better value to our customers, or in healthcare to our patients. It’s not necessarily Japan that’s perfect on this; in the Western world things that are challenging for Japanese may be more easy for, say, someone in the US and vice versa.”

### **Respect for People**

On the topic of the cultural aspects of Lean, I asked Katie about what she learned, saw, or was told in Japan about the idea of “respect for people,” in terms of the dual pillars of the Toyota Way.

Katie said that one thing that was

universal across the organizations she visited there was this pillar of respect for people, meaning the way they engage people in problem solving, and how they develop people.

“Not just [respect for] employees, but how do you deliver good for the community? I feel like this emphasis on people development and creating a culture of respect where it means everyone is supported and engaged and not constrained, is one that we don’t necessarily see as much focus on in the US or potentially other countries as well; we’ve gone more towards the tools side of the Toyota Production System,” Katie said. “Even smaller organizations out in the communities, [they are saying] we want to be there to respect our employees and get them engaged. We also want to provide them with employment, and then in that way we’re creating a better community. We also want to be good for the environment. How do we improve our processes so that we’re contributing for a better environment? How do we give small things that might add joy that we might consider customer service for the employees and their families?”

## Revitalization

Katie explained that there’s a deep sense of connecting with people, the community and doing good. Another related concept Katie regularly heard was “revitalization,” as in practicing principles to revitalize the industry and community, which also meant bringing in jobs and money back to the community.

***“That concept, of revitalization, is linked so tightly with respect for people and respect for humanity.”***

“It wasn’t just in rural areas I heard this word applied, but in a Tokyo word office, like a government office,” Katie explained. “That concept, of revitalization, is linked so tightly with respect for people and respect for humanity.”

## The 5S City

When I asked Katie about the town that labels itself “the 5S city,” revitalization was also tied in.

“This town called Ashikaga and they really use the concept of 5S for revitalization,” Katie said.

She explained that, about 15 years ago, a few prominent organizations were using 5S principles and saw success in their own organizations in regards to engagement and improvements. They came together with the town leadership and developed a 5S school as a way to teach other organizations within the town how to implement 5S.

The school has now expanded to teach other organizations across the country and beyond.

“I think now about over 150 or 160 organizations, governments, schools, and manufacturing groups all practice 5S,” Katie said. “This is 5S beyond when initially you think, ‘Oh, 5S, let’s make sure everything is organized, and straight, and clean. We have a process for maintaining it.’ They also bring this concept of joy into the work. I was really blown away by the discussion we had about 5S being there to engage people. Managers just bring forward the concept, then staff and employees are supposed to use their creativity to make their workplace more organized and more joyful.”

## 5S at Ogura Metal

Katie followed that up by sharing a Gemba walk—a visit to the front

lines to see processes in detail—she had at an organization called Ogura Metal.

“They took it to another level. Yes, everything was organized, they had a process, and they had an amazing Kanban system in place. They had what they considered the Ogura Production System, that went way beyond just 5S.”

***“They had what they considered the Ogura Production System, that went way beyond just 5S.”***

Katie explained that they brought in concepts of color, and fun to the workplace. For example, one work area was called the fruit stand, and all the workstations were decorated like fruit stands. The shipping area had a grocery store theme, and so flat things were called pizza. Iron plates were called steaks, etc. In this way, the employees had a little more fun with the environment, but still kept to the original principles.

“The staff are way more engaged, and they actually saw improvements in productivity and also turnaround times, or lead times for delivery, because people are so engaged. I love it!,” Katie said.

## Mentorship with Mr. Isao Yoshino

Before we wrapped up I asked about the opportunity Katie had to mentor with Mr. Isao Yoshino.

“We had just found out the we were moving to Japan. It was twoandahalf years ago. I was at a Lean coaching summit. Mr. Yoshino, who was John Shook’s first manager in Toyota City when John joined Toyota as the first foreign employee in

Japan, was at the conference. I mentioned I was going to Japan and he gave me his business card and said, 'Look me up when you arrive.' I thought to myself, 'Absolutely. I'm going to be doing that!,' Katie said.

***"He just has words of wisdom, which I've written about extensively. I always have my notepad open with me and I'm just writing things down."***

Mr. Yoshino offered to take Katie to Toyota City and show her around, which was the first of eight or nine visits she had with him, including a trip to Toyota Memorial Hospital where he also served as the interpreter.

"It was very interesting for him to go to a healthcare organization, having been in manufacturing. He just has words of wisdom, which I've written about extensively. I always have my notepad open with me and I'm just writing things down."

Katie said that Mr. Yoshino was very interested in learning how the Toyota way and the Toyota Production System principles were being translated into the healthcare environment, and was particularly also interested in how they were deploying "Hoshin Kanri" (or strategy deployment), because that was a big emphasis of his time and a lot of what he lectures on now.

### **More Information and a Giveaway**

Katie plans to continue to blog about her discussions with Mr.

Yoshino, as well as many more of her experiences in Japan on [kbjanderson.com](http://kbjanderson.com) soon. Deciding to spend the time she was there gathering the experiences, she is now working on catching up on the backlog of reporting them for us to enjoy.

Katie has put together a special page on her website for Lean Blog Podcast listeners, which you can visit at [kbjanderson.com/mark](http://kbjanderson.com/mark). On that page Katie is running a giveaway for a daruma — a Japanese doll that has two blank eyes. You fill in one of the eyes, when you set a goal or an intention, and the other when you achieve it—and a copy of my book *Lean Hospitals*. Even if you visit the page after the giveaway has ended, you'll still be able to get a copy of Katie's top 10 lessons from Mr. Yoshino about Lean thinking and practice and leadership. Good luck!



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