

Business901

Podcast Transcription

Implementing Lean Marketing Systems

Dominica DeGrandis has taught the use and implementation of the Kanban method to teams and organizations in San Francisco, Seattle, Portland, Boston, New York, Philadelphia, Minneapolis, Miami, Detroit, Salt Lake, Paris, London, Ghent, Munich, Columbia... and counting.

The thrust of her work is to teach methods for managing and improving workflow and communication between and within teams and departments, especially the workflow through IT. She is a proponent of the [DevOps](#) movement and works to bridge the gap between Development and Operations teams.



After spending most of her career synchronizing interactions and dependencies between teams, Dominica is keen on improving the way teams work together to help bring alignment to the entire organization. Dominica holds a BS in Information Computer Science from the University of Hawaii. She is an independent trainer, coach and international speaker.

She can be reached at dominica@ddegrandis.com and on twitter at [@dominicad](https://twitter.com/dominicad) when not in the yoga studio or the garden.

Transcription of Podcast

Joe Dager: Welcome, everyone. This is Joe Dager, the host of the Business901 podcast. With me today is Dominica DeGrandis. She teaches and coaches teams, using Kanban for IT operations and development operations. She is an independent consultant, with a background that includes 10 years of doing configuration management, build and deployment automation, and server and environment maintenance, followed by leading teams performing those functions.

She has also filled the role of project and program manager. She travels across the world speaking about her signature area of work, improving interactions and dependencies between teams. With a little time left, she spends it at the yoga studio or in the garden.

Dominica, I would like to welcome you, and would like to ask you, which have you been practicing longer? DevOps, or yoga?

Dominica DeGrandis: Hey, Joe, thanks for having me on. It's great to be here. I have probably been practicing DevOps longer than yoga, I would have to say. They wouldn't call it DevOps, back 10, 12 years ago, but I always seemed to be in a position of the middle person between the development and the operations teams, and having to do handoffs all the time, and handle integration points. So that goes back with my first job, out of college.

Joe: I always thought of yoga as an individual thing, finding peace with yourself. But knowing that



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you're an avid practitioner of yoga, what are some of the principles of yoga that helps in teamwork?

Dominica: It's remarkable how the energy is different, depending on the different people at the yoga studio. Sometimes you'll go in, and there will just be a few people, and they might all be fairly advanced. And there's a different rhythm that happens when you have some advanced practitioners in the room, versus if you're in, what I mean, a really big class. There might be some beginners, there might be some people who have never done yoga before, medium people, and advanced people. The idea of vinyasa yoga, which is all about moving and flowing, vinyasa's like a flow yoga. It's concentrated on breathing, and your breath for different positions. So when you have a group of people doing yoga together, and they're all breathing together, there's energy in the room that starts to happen. I can feel it happening in the room, and it's like everybody's in sync, and supporting one another.

Even though I think initially it's meant to be as an individual, I work out all the time with lots of people.

Joe: Let me dive into the teamwork a bit here. Is teamwork that much different in DevOps than it is in other parts of an organization?

Dominica: I believe so, yes. I believe that because there are different incentives for development teams versus operations teams. In the development world, you are getting paid, and you are getting recognition for creating, developing, and deploying new functionality into production. In the operation's world, we are getting paid and recognized for keeping productions stable. Anytime change is put into production, there is a risk of destabilizing it. There're two opposite ends there as far as incentives go. Usually these two things will report up to different

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directors. Sometimes you'll have to go to a VP level to get a common leadership point.

Joe: Well, you're a proponent of combining the two, aren't you?

Dominica: I'm a proponent of the DevOps movement. The DevOps movement is about bridging that gap between the two teams. You could merge these teams but not necessarily. It's really meant to help bring an understanding of these different teams so that they can break out of their individual functional silos and start improving the way they work together for the benefit of the organization as a whole. What's the real goal here? Are we trying to deliver new functionality to get us a jump ahead in the market? We want to start having teams look at that goal instead of just only trying to keep production stable or only trying to get the highest number of change request fixed in a limited amount of time.

Joe: When we talk about that gap, to bridge it or bring it together. The obvious thing is better communication, but there's got to be more to it than that.

Dominica: Completely. I think the biggest thing is probably bringing visibility. Bringing visibility to what the other teams are doing. Many times these teams have heavy dependencies on each other. The development team is dependent on operations supplying them with environments and equipment. Access to different databases and trying to bring some visibility to those dependencies upfront and early on is very useful. Normally, we don't have a lot of visibility between these two teams because they're off in their own silo. They're off in their own world and one team will say, "Oh, why does it take so long to get an environment up?"

They don't have a clue at the struggles that some of these operations teams have to go through just to get servers ordered in or just to get refreshed from production. So this ability helps

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bridge the gap between the teams and it brings them closer together so they can understand and help. We want them to help each other out.

Joe: Well, this may be naïve on my part to even say that, but when you talk about the visualization, is that just putting a big task board up there for everybody to see?

Dominica: It's a good start, putting the work that's being done up on the board so people can see what tasks or what work items need to be completed in order for the job to be done. "Done" is a tricky word because what's the definition of "done?" In many cases it's, "OK, I've coded up this story, and it's done. I'm throwing it over the fence to operations. I'm done."

The idea is, well, no, it's really not done. It's not done until it's working in production. Then we can all consider it done.

But even then I would say it's still really not done. Is it being used in production? A lot of times we'll deliver functionality, and it doesn't get used. I would say it's really never done until that functionality is not in use anymore, and it's been sun set because we still have to maintain it. We still have to maintain those servers that run that functionality.

Joe: What's the difference between, let's say, a task board and a Kanban board?

Dominica: A Kanban board is going to show the work in progress. It's probably going to have WIP limits on top of the columns, Work In Progress limits, so that you can see what's coming up next and what's being probably delayed because it cannot be worked on yet due to the WIP limits. You're likely going to be able to notice bottlenecks on a Kanban board. There are very simplistic Kanban boards. To do, doing, done. I don't see a whole lot of that in my world in a DevOps implementation. We've got maybe a "next" column. We've got maybe a "waiting for"

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column where we're waiting on some dependencies, and maybe some analysis is going on with some implementation. We can visually see the steps of the workflow that is happening from development through operations all the way until it's delivered.

Instead of just having one "done" column because "done" is hard to define, we might have a "delivered" column on the board. Then after that, have a column that will indicate features or functions that are actually in use and have been maintained. We have all the monitoring and everything set up for that functionality.

Another item that I like to see on my Kanban board anyway is an abandoned work area. I just did an Ignite talk at the last DevOps staged in Mountain View, California on this because I think it's an essential thing for us to think about. The business understands the direction that they're going, but they may change their mind. They may pivot. They may want to stop working on a feature that got so far through the pipeline.

Sometimes this can say...well, it used to for me. It would impact morale because it was like, "Oh, we put all this effort into doing this work, and now the business wants to consider it waste and it goes in the waste bin."

But with an abandoned work area on the board, then we anticipate that there may be those kinds of changes, that we do expect some work to be abandoned and not make it all the way to production, and that's the right thing to do and we need to let go of that work and be OK with it.

Joe: When you talk about a Kanban board, does each team have their own Kanban board then?

Dominica: That really depends. That's highly contextual in the organization. It depends on the size of the organization. It depends on how well these teams are integrated or not. The goal is to have a Kanban board that you can walk up to and it makes

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sense and people can understand what's going on. If there's too much stuff going on in the Kanban board and it's too confusing, it's not going to work right. It's whatever works. If one team starts using Kanban, say a development team starts using Kanban, then, it may spread virally, and we'll see others' teams in the organization start putting up their own Kanban boards.

Then they start working together over time and it may be that they'll evolve into one Kanban board so that both teams can see each other's work on the board. That can be very useful, but it does require support from leadership to do that.

Joe: I think that's a big thing because all of these boards look kind of messy to me. And you're saying another team should be able to come up and decipher someone else's board?

Dominica: I think it's really helpful if they can. If different teams have their own Kanban boards and they're using different colors for post-it notes and different policies, it'll be harder. It'll be more confusing for teams to read the other one's board. So it can be helpful and help them keep it in better alignment if they can agree upon some-- I don't want to standard, because there really is no standard, but you could see how it could be helpful if, for example, people would use bright pink post-it notes to designate blocking tickets.

Then, as you're moving through the organization, people would know "OK, that's a pink post-it note, so they must be blocked on something. OK, let's see what they're blocked on."

Joe: I think that would be an excellent idea. It is a good thing to develop some "standards" about a board.

Dominica: In the same organization, if the goal is to--down the road we think that we might want to bring these teams into better alignment or maybe even merge these teams together,

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then the easier it is to understand each other's boards and that the better it is.

Joe: What do you mean by workflow mapping?

Dominica: What I mean by workflow mapping is identifying the steps basically that the work flows through. It's up to understand how work comes into your organization and then how it exits or how it gets handed off to the next team, and to clearly enter all those states in there. When we first started using Kanban back in 2006, at Corbis, we were using it for sustainment fixes--production fixes and sustainment fixes, small changes. We had the analysis work and development work, and then it would go into test.

I sort of raised my hand and went, "Well, hey. Wait a minute. There's this whole area in there where we're getting the code, and source code control, and we're doing builds, and we're packaging it up, and deploying it to these environments. Where's all that work happening? It's not magic."

I admit, there was a sense of, "Hey, what about me?" Not even representing all the work I'm doing, or that our team is doing on the board. We ended up putting a build ready queue on the board, so that we could really see all the steps that the work needed to get to in order to see value for the business.

Joe: In your speaking and in your work, you work a lot with creating teams.

Dominica: Not necessarily creating teams, but uniting teams. I would say, uniting the different teams so that work can flow smoother between the teams. I believe that the integration points and the handoffs are some of the biggest risks in software development. When we have to hand things off to a different team is where we have a lot of problems, a lot of accidents, and a lot of unknowns. The better those teams can be aligned, and sync

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up, and understand the problems that the other team is facing. I think the bigger the improvement that we have, and the faster that we'll be able to deploy those improvements into production, to see if that's what the customer wants or not.

Joe: How do you go about making that handoff? Do you have two teams meeting together to make it? How do you go about doing that?

Dominica: A couple of key things: One is standups, having standups in front of the Kanban board, and ensuring that somebody from the operations team is attending the development team's standup in front of their Kanban board. These standups are very short, and very brief. They're typically centered on blocking issues. If I'm in an operations role, and I'm attending a development Kanban standup, I can see what's blocking them, and I can also get a good look ahead. I can see what's coming up the pike, so I have fewer surprises. "Oh, I didn't know you needed an environment by tomorrow."

Dominica: I can find that kind of stuff out earlier. Hopefully have some kind of feedback mechanism in place too, so that the teams can learn what's working, what's not working well, and we would do this not only through standups, but through ops review. Operations review is a monthly meeting where the goal is to, basically, show the data. Each lead of a team will get up and, just like in five minutes, present the demand that their team is seeing, and their capability to meet that demand, and what their issues are.

The good, the bad, and the embarrassing get revealed at these ops reviews. I believe that brings about empathy between different teams, and a greater understanding, and that helps teams want to work together better to improve everybody's life.

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Joe: I picture each team rolling in their Kanban board, their monthly briefing.

Dominica: We hope, that it's off-site, so that people are focused and paying attention, but they'll show their cumulative flow diagrams, or their control charts. They'll show their issues. It's more about looking at the actual data over the last 30 days.

Joe: We have daily standups, and the monthly review with everybody, that's typically off-site. Do we have a weekly?

Dominica: Not necessarily.

Joe: We talk a lot about multiple teams working together. Is it a combination of just team leaders communicating with each other? You mentioned someone from the ops team was attending the development teams. How do you get the multiple teams to work together like that?

Dominica: I think one of the best scenarios is if you have one board that incorporates all these teams, and everybody's at the same standup every morning. To me, that's ideal. Organizations don't always have the ability to do that. And they might say, "Oh, our team's too big." But we had about 50 people attending our standup. It was a huge implementation, like a 12 million dollar implementation of SAP that impacted everybody from analysis, to business, to ops, to development. Customers or product owners would attend these standups, and then everybody gets to see what the issues are.

Obviously, if you're not ready for that and your teams do have separate Kanban boards and separate standups, hopefully the standups are staggered so that people can attend one or the other.

Another great thing I've seen is when somebody from one team is actually embedded in another team for a period of time, maybe

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30 days, or 60 day. You might have a team member embedded in that team and their working right alongside them.

Joe: That was really one of my questions here, what happens when someone has to be on multiple teams. Is he going to multiple meetings?

Dominica: Oh, that's a great question. Hopefully, you can design your Kanban system to show demand coming in on maybe one shared services team and how it's impacting them and how and how are they supposed to prioritize across five or six projects. I think that's where the visibility can be so critical to bring about understanding because people can only do so many things at once.

And if a shared services team, there's a real risk there. If you've got four or five projects going on, and everybody needs support from the security guy, or from the sysadmin guy. How do they go about prioritizing?

It's very challenging. If we can visualize that on a board and bring customers to see that--when I say customers I'm not necessarily talking about external customers to the company, but downstream and upstream customers, business people, or developers, or product owners.

If they can come look at a board and see the demand that's coming into their shared services team, then they can begin to help prioritize, so that the shared services team, or a person in a shared service role, it'd be easier for them to select the next work item to work on, or the next task to work on.

When you visualize a board like that, it could be that they decide to hire more people. It could be that they decide to actually bring some of those specialized skill sets into the team. In other words, they might embed a specialized skill set into their team for a while.

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Joe: One of the statements I heard in your talk in Boston is that you can set policies in place, instead of solutions. Could you explain what you mean by that?

Dominica: I love policies. We talk about making policies explicit. This is all about, stop hiding the rules. That's really what we mean when we say, "Make process policies explicit." "Stop hiding the rule on page 200 that's in some document that's buried out on a share that nobody can find." If there's a policy, for example, say developers are supposed to check their code into this branch, then put it up, make it visible to them. Especially new people being hired, they don't know where to go find policies. Put policies up next to your Kanban board, or put them at the bottom of your Kanban board. Sometimes you'll see a policy at the bottom of each column, and that's the policy for the criteria before the item can be pulled into the next column. Policies can be changed when they need to be changed.

Policies are really just a short-term, tactical fix to make an improvement while you're waiting on some longer term strategic fix. Policies can come and go, and be modified. The idea is that if a policy is staring at you, it's much easier than to have a discussion about why it's a bad policy or a good policy, or how it needs to be changed.

Joe: Talk about the goalie that stops people from interfering with the team and everything. How much authority does a goalie have? Can he stop a leader from coming in on the team?

Dominica: The goalie is really about running interface to protect the rest of the team from getting interrupted. Like most things, we really need leadership support in all of this. If the VP comes in and interrupts somebody, maybe they need to be reminded about, "Hey, we have this policy. We have a goalie, and please go work with the goalie, so we don't get interrupted." We'll probably always have emergencies. That's just the nature of our work in

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operations. We will handle the emergencies. And that's why it's important to design a Kanban system that's going to handle emergencies, so that we have the capability to do that.

But the thing I love about the goalie is, one, it helps provide cross-training for the team. If you have one person that's always handling that one feature, or that one functionality, or that one tool, it brings in a lot of risk. When they win the lottery, it's not when they get hit by the bus, it's when they win the lottery, and they call in rich, who else is going to take it? The goalie helps to cross-train teams, reduces that risk.

It's a rotating position. It might rotate on a weekly basis, or maybe a 10 day basis, or whatever. So everybody gets to understand the problems that people are having on a day-to-day basis. It's a way to train people. It's also a way to help document or automate some of those daily requests that come in.

Joe: Is there something about Kanban or DevOps you'd like to add that maybe I didn't ask?

Dominica: One of the biggest challenges with Kanban is that, because it's not very prescriptive, and people will ask...Some people will want to be told what to do. And that can be really challenging, because that's not really easy. What we like to do is, we're trying to improve collaboratively by doing these safety fail experiments. "We're going to try this, see how it works, adjust it slightly, and try it again." It's through that gradual evolution over time where we can, hopefully, get to where we want to go. That's one of, probably, the bigger challenges that I see. Also, people will try to copy other people's Kanban boards, and that's a big problem. Trying to do what everybody else is doing just rarely works. Your situation is likely to be different, and sometimes it can just be dangerous to copy somebody else's Kanban design.

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Joe: You also have a couple of community groups online that you work with in the DevOps field. Could you name them, and mention how someone could contact you?

Dominica: Sure. There is Kanban Ops. It's a Yahoo! Group. You just google "Kanban Ops." It's a private group, which is nice, because we don't have a lot of vendors posting outside, trying to sell anything. Kanban Ops is a group of practitioners who can ask questions, like Kanban Dev. There's a Kanban Dev Yahoo! Group too, where people can just ask questions to the community and get responses. The Kanban Ops group is much smaller. It's really just getting going, but it's more about case studies for the community out there who's using Kanban for ops, and I facilitate that group. So if somebody just went to Kanban Ops and subscribed to that, then I would approve that.

We have the Limited WIP Society, which is a nonprofit international society. There are local Limited WIP Societies all over the world, Australia, London, Europe, U.S., everywhere, and they have meetups. It's a great resource to go to, for example, get a list of the three dozen online electronic Kanban tools out there on the market now, things like that. Then there are videos out there from all the latest speakers at the Lean Kanban conferences.

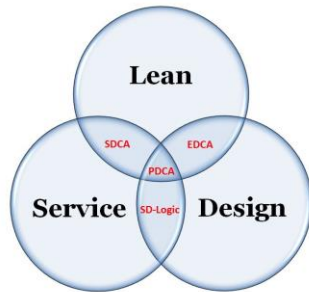
One last thing I wanted to mention, Joe, was another important thing to know about Kanban, typically, especially in the office arena, we are used to having work pushed on us, right? "Do this, do that," without people really understanding the front up-time that we might need.

That continual pressure and force are just not sustainable. Even no relationship can respond positively to that continued force. That's why it's so key to set those work in progress limits and to adhere to them.

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Joe Dager is president of Business901, a firm specializing in bringing the continuous improvement process to the sales and marketing arena. He takes his process thinking of over thirty years in marketing within a wide variety of industries and applies it through Lean Marketing and Lean Service Design.

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