

It's All in How You Say It

Words matter in continuous improvement *By Drew Locher*

During recent gemba walks at several companies, I have been reminded of a phenomenon that has been referred to as “no problem is a problem.” There are many problems, but people are unable or reluctant to bring them to light for numerous reasons. Participants in these walks through a product or service flow ask associates questions like these:

- What issues exist?
- What problems are you encountering?
- What's wrong with the process?

Responses tend to be on the order of “Nothing comes to mind,” “Everything is fine,” and other variations of “No problem here.” In contrast, in a culture of continuous improvement, problems are treated as gold and people readily identify them.

GETTING OVER THE HURDLE

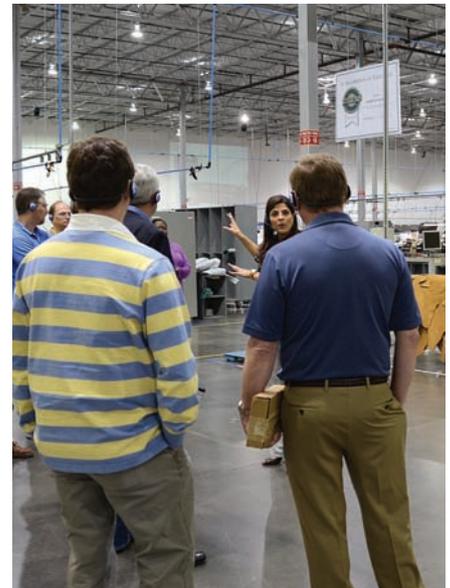
Let's consider the possible causes for the “no problem” response. First, it may lie in the words themselves and the thoughts that specific words give rise to in employ-

ees' minds. Not surprisingly, the word “problem” has a negative connotation. There may be a fear that problems identified in an area will be viewed as evidence of poor performance. Perhaps in the past, people who identified what's wrong to management may have experienced a response that was one of blame.

Others might view the identification of problems as complaining. Even the seemingly innocuous question, “What ideas for improvement do you have?” can be taken in ways unintended by the person who is asking.

“If there is a better way, don't you think I would have thought of it?” is an oft-heard response, if not explicitly then implicitly.

Another possibility is that people truly believe that no problems exist. In the context of current circumstances, work is getting done, customers are being served, and all is seemingly okay. After all, people have been doing what they have been doing for quite some time, and it has been good enough up to this point.



Continuous improvement starts with people, particularly leaders, asking the correct questions and making appropriate statements.

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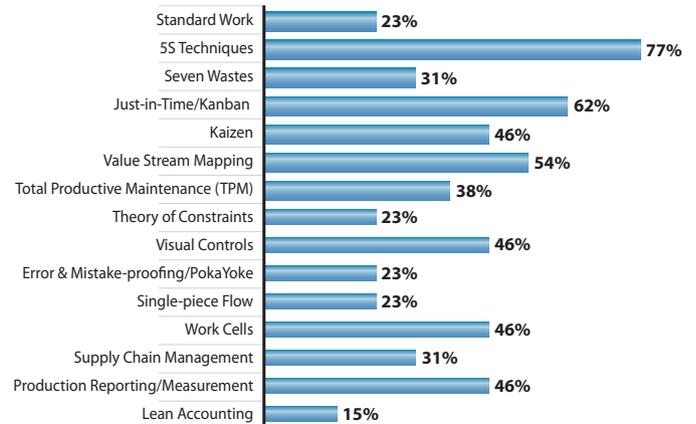
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The State of Lean in 2012

When A.R.E. surveyed manufacturing member companies in January, 86 percent of respondents replied that their company practices some variety of lean manufacturing in their operations. This is an increase compared to the 72 percent practicing lean when we conducted a similar survey in 2004. Of the companies in our survey who are implementing lean:

- 62 percent have a person on staff dedicated to heading up lean efforts within the company.
- 54 percent rate their company's commitment to lean manufacturing as "high" or "very high."
- Not all are able to implement lean as fully as they would like. Time, competing priorities, the need for a dedicated lean champion, the difficulty of establishing and maintaining new habits, and the difficulty of keeping all employees involved consistently were all cited as challenges by respondents.

Most Effective Lean Tools used by A.R.E. Members



So when the question about opportunities for improvement is asked, it should not come as a surprise that a common response is "I can't think of anything."

SETTING A DIFFERENT CONTEXT

The fact of the matter is there can be several possible causes, specific to the individuals involved. There is a need to reframe the question. Instead of asking what problems employees have, consider a different form of question altogether, such as these examples:

- How can we improve our telephone response time by 25 percent with our current staffing?
- How can we maintain a high level of on-time delivery while reducing our finished goods inventory by 30 percent?
- How might we meet an expected 15 percent increase in demand in the next year with the resources that we have?

Questions formulated in this manner offer a different context for employees to provide a response. They prompt people to consider a different set of circumstances from those that currently exist. For people who truly believe that no problems exist, posing questions in this form tend to stretch their thinking, initiating the creative process of problemsolving to close the constructed gap.

Don't underestimate the strength of the positive aspect of questions in this form. They represent a forward-looking challenge rather than a backward reflection of something that is wrong. Recently this has been

called "target condition" thinking. People will be more likely to view the prompting in the positive way it is intended and rise to a challenge as a path to achievement. And achievement, of course, can lead to a satisfying and rewarding work environment.

THE TOP FIVE ACHIEVEMENTS of "lean" A.R.E. companies

- 1 Elimination of waste (92%)
- 2 Shorter production times (85%)
- 3 Lower production costs and increased levels of employee engagement/responsibility (both 77%)
- 4 Higher-quality products (69%)
- 5 Lower inventory (54%)

EASING ANXIETY

Words also matter as we approach the "Do" stage of Deming's Plan-Do-Check-Act (PDCA) improvement cycle. At this stage it is often emphasized that the action is really about experimentation. We don't know with 100 percent certainty that a change will be effective until we try it and "Check" that it does. Up to this point it has been a discussion of a hypothesis. At this point words will lead to action; change is about to happen.

Naturally, there will be some apprehension. The emphasis on experimentation is an attempt to ease people's anxiety about change. "Let's try it and see if it works" is often said at this point. However, the anxiety remains. Why? This simple expression

can give rise to negative thoughts such as "What if it *doesn't* work?" It becomes a matter of success versus failure, and people generally fear failure.

Would we evoke a different reaction if we said, "Let's try it and see what we learn?" Presenting the change in this manner better conveys Deming's true intent of PDCA and its emphasis on experimentation. Would making this statement help to allay people's natural apprehension about change?

With enough positive experiences, and sufficient repetition, people will begin to embrace continuous improvement and make it part of their everyday routines. They will catch the "change habit." But it starts with people, particularly leaders, asking the correct questions and making appropriate statements. 🌍

Suggested Reading

Toyota Kata: Managing People for Improvement, Adaptiveness, and Superior Results by Mike Rother (McGraw Hill, 2010)



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