Bob Williamson, Contributing Editor

The capacity assurance world of maintenance and reliability is like most other professions with unique words, phrases and terminology. Many of us grew up with this "language," which makes some of the jargon and acronyms second nature—"maintenance-speak." But, when we interact with the uninitiated in the "outside world," sometimes they think we are speaking a foreign language.

In fact, maintenance and reliability terminology differs from industry to industry and geographic region to region. In my travels around the world, all over North America, in more than 400 plants, across some 45 different industries, I admit that I, too, have been confused by some of the words and phrases used in maintenance and reliability discussions. When a "raw recruit" enters the mysterious world of maintenance and reliability you can imagine the communications gaps, the confusion and the errors that can be attributed to the words we use as second nature. Just to be able to communicate, my own daughter developed her own "glossary of jargon" when she came to work with me years ago. And, what about others, especially decision-makers in our own plants and facilities, who listen with frustration as we baffle them with our unique language? To borrow a quote from Cool Hand Luke, "What we've got here is a failure to communicate."

Sometimes we use "maintenance-speak" to communicate something really important about why something happened, but the listener just isn't listening. "What we have here is a failure to communicate! What? What we have here is a failure to communicate! Huh? I'm sorry. I wasn't listening." That was the disconnected dialogue between the prison warden and Johnny in the 1997 movie Johnny Bravo. OK. Go ahead. Make my day! Tell me you haven't had similar situations in your routine communications about maintenance and reliability issues where you work.

A society of acronyms

We certainly are a jargon- and acronym-rich business. For example, we often have to determine

what caused a problem with a critical piece of equipment. What happens next can begin the confusion. We can talk about root cause analysis, RCA, root cause failure analysis, RCFA, failure analysis, FA, failure modes and effects analysis, FMEA, finite element analysis, FEA… Only to hear words of frustration—"I don't care what the heck you call what you're about to do. I just want to know what caused this thing to stop in the middle of the day!"

Then we also have an alphabet-soup of three-letter acronyms (TLAs). You know them. They range from CBM and PdM to RCM and TPM, TQM and SPC to LCC and MDT. The list continues with two- and four-letter variants such as PM, BM, MTTR, MTBF, MTBM and CMMS… And we have to arrange these clever TLAs so there are NO vowels, so they cannot be pronounced easily—so we spell them out like PLC and DCS. Of course, vowels occasionally creep in with CAD, CAM, OEE and ERP. (Excuse me. It's best not to pronounce that last two.)

Sometimes we also mix in letters and numbers. That's our attempt to communicate something that must be really big and important such as ISO 9000, TS 16949, QS 9000, ISO 14000 and OSHA 1910.

In the past 20 years, Lean Manufacturing (LM) and Japanese and German words have crept into many companies—offering us even more ways to baffle ourselves and others with "lean-speak" mixed with our own "maintenance-speak." We start with the basics of 5S, KAIZEN and TPS. Then comes KANBAN, TAKT, JIDOKA, HEIJUNKA, POKAYOKE (it's not polite to use BAKA-YOKE). Then, the scientific Greek language creeps in with SIX SIGMA (the lower-case Greek letter s), which leads into ANSI/ISA 88, IEC 62264. These terms, subsequently, have to be followed up with Champions, Master Black Belts, Black Belts and Green Belts. But that's not all. At this point we certainly cannot overlook the six sigma tools of DMIAC and DMADV or DFSS plus SIPOC or PARETO (named after Italian economist Vilfredo Pareto).

As the business of maintenance is connected to the business of the business we often hear (and sometimes actually speak) RONA, ROFA, RAV, ROCA, ROA, ROTA and other real and made-up terms to describe a financial return on assets of sorts.

This discussion of our terminology would not be complete without our professional associations SMRP, AFE, APICS and SME, to name a few, and their respective certifications CMRP, CPMM, CPE, CPS, CPIM, CSCP, CIRM, CFPIM, CMfgT, CmfgE and CEM. Put those certifications on your resume along with the colleges and universities you attended, and you get to add UTK, UofM, MSU, A&M, UCLA, MIT, UGA, AU, USC, ISU, UT, FSU and so on with BA, BS, AS, MS

and/or PhD degrees. We are a society of acronyms!

The point of this exercise

Most of us have encountered someone who does not speak our language—for most of our readers, that's American English—and we should remember what it's like NOT to understand or to be understood. Awash with so many unique utterances and spoken shorthand elements that come to our lips as second nature, however, we often forget when we speak.

If you notice a bewildered look on the face of others as you speak the capacity assurance languages of maintenance and reliability, take a step back and think about what you are really trying to communicate. As a younger generation begins exploring careers in our field, it will have an overwhelming amount of skills and knowledge to embrace and learn—not to mention countless straightforward and valuable concepts that are promoted through confusing jargon and acronyms.

Near the end of the movie Cool Hand Luke, Paul Newman, the reprobate inmate "Luke," repeated the famous lines he learned from the guard, "What we've got here is a failure to communicate." Let's be careful not to be forced to utter—or to hear—those same words spoken around our plants and facilities. **MT**