

Make Sure Your Message Is Understood

Written by Bob Call, Life Cycle Engineering
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Bonjour! Bongiorno! Buenos dias! Salut! Hola! No matter what language you speak, it all translates to the same thing, right? Well, you might want to rethink that belief.

A common challenge across many industries, when it comes to corporate growth, is how to successfully communicate a specific message in another language. While English is the accepted language of world finance and corporate operations, when your business takes you to another country, you must be willing and able to adapt. This is especially true in the case of manufacturing and maintenance, where a majority of employees are local men and women just trying to make a living.

There is no question that everyone prefers to be trained, lectured, facilitated, coached and otherwise communicated with in his or her native tongue. We Americans are probably more demanding of this than any group of people.

It is not unusual to see, for example, an American on business or vacation abroad who becomes indignant because a local shop owner doesn't do business in English. Could it be that we simply don't make the connection that over there WE are the foreigners!? The truth of the matter is that regardless of which country we may visit, it should be incumbent upon us to at least attempt the local language. This simple—sometimes embarrassing—act will allow you to garner an immense amount of respect with the local population. And, it will provide a great measure of credibility with your client in a foreign country.

Remember that if your work takes you out of the United States, you generally can't make the transition without some local help from within the country you are visiting. Presentations and training materials must be translated—and should be done by someone who "speaks the lingo" of your profession.

Take a look at any English-to-"X" dictionary and see just how many engineering, maintenance or manufacturing-unique words it contains. Unfortunately, there are very few. Yet, it is utterly impossible to communicate any principles or theories to a plant, maintenance, materials, reliability or other professional without using these technical words.

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If you can't find a dictionary of technical or engineering terms for your language requirements, you have no option but to find a local resource—or give up the client. It's your choice.

Most maintenance professionals in the U.S. understand the theory, process and application of the Responsibility, Accountability, Support and Information (RASI) model. In every process, each step requires someone who is "Responsible" for getting it done (the Doer) and someone who is ultimately "Accountable" for this step in the process (the Buck Stops Here). I was embarking on a coaching session at a client site in Quebec, in the beginning stages of RASI development, when several members of our client focus team noted (in French), "But there is no difference between Responsibility and Accountability." As it turned out, they were correct. If you look up the word "accountable" in your French Quebec-American dictionary, you will find that the primary definition is, indeed, "responsible."

We were able to overcome this dilemma in Quebec by re-defining the "R" and the "A" in the classic RASI model. We decided that the "R" would represent the "Accountable" person and the "A" would represent the "Actor" (the Doer), or "Responsible" person in the model. In this way, we were able to retain the RASI title for the model while still accurately representing each of the letters in the acronym. This same approach should work well with many other languages as a company may continue expanding its business into the global market.

Many language scholars would agree that, while most Americans struggle with any foreign language, English—and American English, in particular—is, in fact the hardest language to master. We have many words that are spelled the same, but which have several different meanings, as well as many different words with the same root meaning.

The message here is that if you have designs on expanding your business or service outside of the U.S., don't get caught with your Funk & Wagnalls down!

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