

Speaking *their* language

We couda got da business but never got da chance.

Last year I worked with a young man who was helping me put in a driveway/patio. He was probably around the same as my daughter in college. Because of our generational differences, I had to be on my toes to keep up with speaking his language. I had to learn new terms like wazzup, yo, waz shakin' and a few I could not quite get (street talk). I personally have nothing against using these words as long as I understand the meaning.

For example, my job as a sales engineer (problem solver) was to sell and solve lubrication problems on the shop floor. To perform this task, I found it necessary to communicate on three levels. The first level is the purchasing department (dollars). The second level is engineering (technical). The last level is the shop floor supervisor and machine operator (practical).

Let's discuss the third level because, after all, this column is about the shop floor. Both the shop floor and the young man helping me with my driveway/patio have a lot in common. In talking with machine operators, I have trouble understanding what it is they are saying. Terms like squeaking, chatter or wrinkling all mean something to them, but I needed a translation to understand. There were similar translation problems on the shop floor when I started using terms like boundary lubrication, slip, stick or EP. The operators get glassy-eyed and wonder what language I'm talking. When this happens, we have mutual mystification.

Early in my career, I ran into a new business opportunity. I wanted to make a good first impression with the company so I requested a chemist accompany me on the call to help solve a lubrication problem they were having. The chemist was very knowledgeable, and I respected him. After talking with the shop floor supervisor and a machine operator to find out what their project goals were, the chemist started explaining how one of our emulsions at 15% dilution would offer the necessary EP for boundary lubrication, have good in-process RP and an easily read RI. This impressed me, though the supervisor and operator were clueless.

After the call was over, I went back to the shop floor to talk about setting up a time to start testing the product the chemist recommended. The supervisor informed me they had chosen another company to work with on their problem. The operator had

said we obviously knew what we were talking about—but he did not. We had failed to talk in his language.

So what happened (waz shakin')?

First, we baffled them with our brilliance. The chemist talked chemistry at a level another chemist or a sales engineer could understand, but it was way above an operator's comprehension. This left the operator feeling inferior and left out of a productive partnership.

I learned that in order to stand out on the shop floor, you have to ask questions, listen to the answers and show respect for the other person's abilities. Do not use buzzwords—otherwise you won't be able to communicate with the shop floor.

The other company had asked more questions to get a clearer picture of what the shop floor was trying to achieve. They had requested clarification about squeaking, chatter and wrinkles and received a translation for any word they did not understand. They had communicated at the shop floor level so they could assemble the information needed to achieve the project goals.

Second, it does not matter how brilliant I am. What matters is whether I can make the shop floor operation better. I cannot achieve this without understanding the problem

clearly. To the shop floor supervisor and operator, I was just another oilman who should have carpooled with the other three oilmen who had looked at the problem earlier in the day.

Lastly, there is a time and a place for everything. I learned never to send a chemist to do a sales engineers' job. The language barrier is too much to overcome.

The time to talk is after you understand. When you speak different languages, wait for the translation before you give an answer.

Yo, we couda got da business but never got da chance. Wazzup?



Understanding the problems of the shop floor is a crucial step to making its operations more efficient.



Pete Oglevie is president of International Production Technologies in Port Washington, Wis. You can reach him at poglevie@wi.rr.com.