

The Two Most Powerful Words in the English Language



On one of his trips to America, Shigeo Shingo reported discovering the two most powerful words in English, at least the two most powerful words in English when it came to business. The first word was powerful enough to describe all the causes of every problem you could encounter on the shop floor. The other word was equally powerful – it describes all potential solutions.

**The two words were
various
and
appropriate.**

Mr. Shingo was on a gemba walk, a walk on the shop floor, and asked, “What is wrong with this process?” “Why, there are various things wrong with this process,” came the reply. So, Mr. Shingo asked, “And what are you doing to address the problem?” With pride the answer came back, “We are taking appropriate measures.” It shouldn’t surprise you to hear that Mr. Shingo did not accept either answer and dug deeper to understand the problem, its root causes, and solutions.

So what is wrong with various? We can’t possibly solve a problem unless we truly understand it. The more complicated the problem, the more important is to determine the root causes. We need to dig in, get the data, ask 5-Whys, develop hypotheses, test them, and then rank the potential causes. Only when we can get past various and enumerate, with some degree of confidence, most of the root causes of the problem can we move to the correct solutions. And not appropriate solutions but specific solutions, specific solutions driven by what we learned about the possible root causes.

If we accept various and appropriate as answers to the questions we pose to our teams we lose an opportunity to teach and lead and help our team learn. Regardless of the role we play – executive, manager, supervisors or team members – we should not let our team escape real sustainable problem solving by accepting various and appropriate as answers to our questions. We need to make sure the team is focused on understanding the problems we face in detail and then implementing the right solution.

Don't accept either word as an acceptable answer. Treat them as red flags or better yet as a cry for help. This is not showing a lack of respect or lack of trust. It is demonstrating leadership. Our teams are not going to solve the problem if we can't get past various and appropriate. Lead the way to correct problem diagnosis and implementing solutions that will drive results!

I must give full credit for this observation to Shigeo Shingo. Those readers with a background in manufacturing or supply chain or Lean Six Sigma will recognize the name. Mr. Shingo was a colleague of Taiichi Ohno, the founder of the Toyota Production System and a leading industrial engineer of the 20th century. While Mr. Shingo made the observations that led to this discussion in reference to a production problem, in my experience this wisdom is applicable to almost every business discipline.

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