

Governing Energy

Yadadamean

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The software company, Oracle offers collaborative solutions in almost 30 languages. One can surmise that this for profit entity is providing products and services its clients have an economic demand for. This need should come as no surprise to observers of our global business environment.

A colleague of mine once remarked that his field operations in the Middle East required that he communicate with personnel in Russian, Chinese, Arabic and English to accomplish the engineering tasks at hand. In situations like this interpersonal communications is one of the Critical Success Factors (CSF).

A breakdown in communications can take place in one of several ways. There can be a misunderstanding based on accent, e.g. the stereotypical New Yorker in Texas. The language of the transaction may be the second (or even third) language for one or more of the participants. Generational based vernacular can enter the picture as well. In other cases, situational issues may contribute to misunderstandings for example, loud machinery noise levels, during crisis management or perhaps a simple lack of attention by one or more parties.

Moreover, communication is not just a function of the words said and their meaning. Verbal interactions also must be placed in context. Interpretation of context is a function of culture, among other variables. Even within a firm there can be different cultures between divisions or perhaps the newly acquired firm and its parent. Additionally, organizations and its key suppliers may have cross cultural communications as well given different business models, heritages, etc.

The ability of an organization / team to communicate across cultures is paramount; never more so than during an HSE driven incident. Applying the pressures of incident management to a multi-faceted / cross cultural task force can exponentially increase communication difficulties.

There are many case studies whereby relatively simple problems rapidly get out of hand when one or more individuals are distracted by either other matters or a multiplicity of cascading events. Poor communications amongst team members can compound this already difficult environment.

Management must realize the communications challenges faced by today's firm. Training and other processes must be put in place to mitigate the risks associated with potential misunderstandings. Not only is good, consistent cross cultural communications a CSF for field operations, it is a CSF for enterprise risk management as well. As such it deserves the same level of managerial attention as other major components of business risk.

BTW (by the way), one translation of the title is, “Do you know what I mean?”ⁱ Not surprisingly there are other slightly different (culturally characterized) interpretations as well.

How does your company assure that individuals involved in mission critical decision making processes can actually communicate with each other?

About the Author

Dr. [Scott M. Shemwell](#) has over 30 years technical and executive management experience primarily in the energy sector. He is the author of two books and has written extensively about the field of operations management. Shemwell is also the CEO of Knowledge Ops, Inc.; a firm that focuses on providing its customers with solutions enabling operations excellence and regulatory compliance management.

End Notes

ⁱ <http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=yadadamean>