

# ■ *From Reliability to Exasperation:* A Case Study in Empty Sloganeering

by Tom Terez

David is a mild-mannered employee who hasn't missed a single day of work in his nine years with the company. He's known in his work area as Mr. Reliable – that quietly effective person who always gets the job done. He usually has good things to say about the manufacturing plant where he works, and when he doesn't, he keeps his thoughts to himself.

At least, that's how it used to be. It seems that Mr. Reliable has quickly morphed into Mr. Exasperation.

"It's those damn posters," he says, referring to the motivational, slogan-filled wall-hangings that were recently taped up throughout his plant. "I'm insulted by posters telling me 'The Customer is King' and urging me to 'Do It Right the First Time.'"

What's going on here? How could a few upbeat posters wreak so much havoc?

When David finally opens up, he explains that for the past year, he and his crew have been asking management for data about customer requirements and satisfaction. At first they were promised the data by week's end. When it failed to arrive, management said that David and his co-workers on the packaging line didn't really need the data. There was also quiet talk about confidentiality; management worried that the data might find its way to competitors.

"If the customer is so kingly, why can't we get that information?" David asks. "Potentially, it would give us ideas on how to improve our process and output. Then there's the issue of confidentiality and trust – don't even get me started on that."

As for the "do it right the first time" exhortation, David tells about an improvement team that analyzed rework in the packaging area. He was on the team with

seven co-workers. They methodically followed an improvement process and came up with a specific recommendation that would have cut rework by 80%.

The team presented its plan to the powers that be, and there were smiles all around. Even the request for an investment in new shrink-wrap technology got approved – or so it seemed. Eight months have passed with little word from management. The plan has been placed "on hold" for reasons not yet explained to the team.

"Our good ideas are on the shelf," David says. "We've done more than our part to do it right the first time. Now they need to do their part."

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Many of us would cast aside these comments as a bunch of sour grapes. But W. Edwards Deming would hold them up as a case study in how employees often react when exhortations and slogans take the place of genuine employee empowerment.

As a statistician who went on to become an expert in management, quality improvement, and systems thinking, Dr. Deming summarized much of his advice in his famous 14 Points. Point 10 is written with the Davids of the world in mind:

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## ■ A Case Study in Empty Sloganeering *continued*

*Eliminate slogans, exhortations and targets for the work force asking for zero defects and new levels of productivity. Such exhortations only create adversarial relationships since the bulk of the causes of low quality and low productivity belong to the system, and thus, lie beyond the power of the work force.*

Deming, drawing on years of statistical studies, found that some 94% of breakdowns, problems, and possibilities for improvement are directly related to the system itself – and not to the people working in the system. In other words, you can have the best and the brightest people doing the work, but if they're stuck with a lousy system that they can't change, they'll produce lousy results.

Imagine a person who is equal parts Einstein, Gandhi, and Houdini – the embodiment of intelligence, goodness, and cleverness. Put this high-performance hybrid of a person into a flawed system, give him inadequate tools, and shortcut his training – then stand on the sidelines cheering him on while he goes about his work. What will you get? You'll get a very smart, good, and clever person who cranks out mediocre results while getting increasingly frustrated.

The best course of action is to improve the system itself. This is also the most challenging approach because it calls for considerable time, a possible financial investment, and the sharing of authority by having the people who do the work improve how the work is done. It's a classic case of effectiveness over efficiency.

As for the posters themselves, David is quick to point out that he's not against them in all cases. He's even open to some sloganeering every now and then.

“If the posters and words reinforce the way things are in the workplace, that's great,” he says. “But when the words say one thing and management doesn't support those words with actions, well, what you end up with is hypocrisy and some serious employee frustration.”

Mr. Reliable sounds like Mr. Reasonable, don't you think?

### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Tom Terez is a speaker, workshop leader, and author of *22 Keys to Creating a Meaningful Workplace*. His Web site, [BetterWorkplaceNow.com](http://BetterWorkplaceNow.com), is filled with tools for building a great work environment.

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