

Leadership Barometer 158 Poka Yoke **Robert T. Whipple, MBA CPTD**



In the lexicon of The Toyota Production System and Lean Thinking, there is a term called “Poka Yoke.” This Japanese term means to “mistake-proof” a thing or operation.

Main objective

The objective of Poka Yoke is to make it virtually impossible to do something incorrectly. We want to stop wrong things from happening. Realize we are fully capable of injuring or disappointing ourselves unless it is prevented.

Common examples

The examples of Poka Yoke in our normal everyday life are myriad. We rarely pay attention to these failsafe measures. Once we become attuned to seeing them, examples tend to crop up like weeds in a summer garden.

Let’s have some fun and describe the start of a typical morning for a production worker named Ben to see how often the Poka Yoke concept is in play.

1. Ben plugs in his electric shaver and it works correctly. The shape of the prongs on the plug makes it impossible for him to electrocute himself.
2. He reaches for a banana for breakfast. It is there because he wrote a note to himself yesterday to pick it up.
3. The key in the ignition of his car is symmetrical, so regardless of which way he inserts it, the key works.
4. Before turning the key he steps on the brake. His car will not start unless the brake is engaged and the transmission is in park. That prevents him from driving through the back of his garage.
5. At work, Ben doesn’t worry about turning off the coffee pot. It automatically times out to prevent scorching the pot or starting a fire.
6. His cell phone dings to remind him that the morning meeting is in 15 minutes.

7. The packaging line where Ben works automatically weighs each package. It rejects any that do not have the right weight.

8. If the line goes down, Ben needs to reset it. He must hit two buttons simultaneously to prevent him from losing a finger.

These are just a few of the thousands of examples of Poka Yoke in an average day.

Poka Yoke in an organization

The Poka Yoke concept can impact the culture of an organization to prevent low motivation and apathy. What would Poka Yoke look like when leaders use it to prevent worker disengagement?

1. Leaders would praise people for expressing their concerns rather than punishing them. That action enables more candid communication of small issues while they are easier to address. The safe environment avoids a loss of trust in the leaders.

2. Managers actually would demonstrate the values they espouse, thus preventing employees from viewing them as hypocrites. The benefit is that the entire population will take the values seriously.

3. Supervisors would listen to employee ideas and demonstrate faith in them to know how to improve things. They would support and champion the ideas of workers. It creates a feeling of higher engagement of shop floor people in the business and avoids a sense of futility.

4. Group Leaders would praise people sincerely for their contributions to the business. This prevents them from feeling that their efforts are ignored. The benefit is higher engagement of all workers, so they freely give maximum discretionary effort.

5. Senior managers would understand it is **their behaviors** that set the tone for everything that happens in the organization. They would hold themselves accountable for creating a culture of high trust where everything works better. That environment avoids a credibility gap between leaders and workers and ultimately results in greatly improved productivity.

Summary

There were two themes in this article. The first was that we experience Poka Yoke in our daily life but are not often aware of it. Secondly, managers often fail to see the opportunity to use Poka Yoke to improve the culture of their organizations.

We can all benefit from using the concept of Poka Yoke in our lives and in our organizations. Let's use it more often.



I am reminded of the famous quote by Mr. Spock, the half-Vulcan on the Star Trek series. He said, "It is curious how often you humans manage to obtain that which you do not want." We should all be proactive at using Poka Yoke in our lives. Try to increase your awareness to recognize more of these failsafe measures. It gets to be a kind of a helpful game.

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