

# Communicate to Inform, Not Impress

Don't try to impress with puffed-up language. Clear, informative, to-the-point communication will win the persuasion game every time.

by Janice Obuchowski

**I**MAGINE YOU'RE AT WORK listening to a presentation: "To recap one of our action items: going forward, it's essential that we leverage our knowledge capital. And to do so, we need to make sure our core competencies are at the leading edge of the best practices within our industry...."

Still listening? If you're like most people, you checked out somewhere around "going forward." Even if you did manage to hang on longer, you'd have been hard pressed to paraphrase the speaker's message afterward.

Jargon and puffery are bad news not because they irritate English teachers and other language types but because they generate boredom and confusion. And an audience that is bored and confused is an audience that isn't being persuaded.

It's easy to fall into the trap of using the important-sounding but vague expressions that constitute so much business communication today. But to get your message across and convince others to follow where you want to lead, you need to convey your thoughts in clear, concrete, and compelling language. Here several experts give their advice on sidestepping common business-language traps and becoming a more persuasive communicator.

## The anonymity trap

According to Brian Fugere, Chelsea Hardaway, and Jon Warshawsky, formerly of Deloitte Consulting and the authors of the provocatively titled *Why Business People Speak Like Idiots: A Bullfighter's Guide* (Free Press, 2005), one reason that phrases like "leveraging knowledge capital" proliferate is that in a corporate culture, where the pressure to conform can be intense, people hear others using such phrases and start using them themselves. The result is an environment in which no voice stands out.

Tim Schellhardt agrees. A former bureau chief at the *Wall Street Journal* and now the senior vice president and director of editorial services at the New York City-based public relations firm Ketchum, he says that much of the business writing he sees is "mired in cliché. It's very stiff, straining to impress. It's not honest: 'Here's who I am.'"

Fugere, Hardaway, and Warshawsky suggest the dearth of original language in the corporate world gives the strate-

gic communicator a chance to distinguish herself with the color and uniqueness of her expression, and offer these tips for letting your unique voice be heard:

1. **Avoid templates.** Don't cut and paste from already existing works. If you want your audience to notice you, you have to use your own words.
2. **Lose some of your polish**—when presenting, that is. People want to see the humanity behind your ideas. "Perfection and predictability will get you good grades in that business school presentation class," they write, "but to your audience, they scream 'prefabricated,' 'rehearsed,' and 'canned.'"
3. **Use humor—carefully.** A little humor can go a long way toward livening up a long speech or business memo—but keep it intelligent and professional.

## The obscurity trap

It's often because people want to sound intelligent and knowledgeable and hence credible and trustworthy that they puff up their speech or writing with jargon. But their tactic can actually undermine them by making them seem evasive and distant.

Jargon has its place, of course; in highly specialized industries, it serves as convenient shorthand. But because having a specialized language seems to lend importance to a profession or industry, jargon crops up in all sorts of business contexts, often serving no purpose other than to sound important.

Because people hear jargon all the time, they become inured to it and no longer pause to consider its meaning. "It's the difference between 'depressed financial outcomes' and 'less money.' Jargon is Orwellian," says Anne Miller, founder of the New York City-based sales consultancy Chiron Associates and author of *Metaphorically Selling* (Chiron Associates, 2004). "It's desensitizing."

To avoid the obscurity trap, think about the terms you bandy about: What do they mean? Could your thoughts be better expressed? "Superb stylists will always prefer the more robust, the shorter words," says Bryan A. Garner,

author of *A Dictionary of Modern American Usage* (Oxford University Press, 1998).

Warshawsky suggests that to test your ability to convey your thoughts, sit down with a friend outside your profession and explain to him the problem you're grappling with, "whether it has to do with China or the supply chain." Then ask him to explain your ideas back to you; Warshawsky predicts that the experience will be illuminating: "People get alarmed when they realize people truly don't understand what they're saying."

### The tedium trap

Short on preparation time and anxious to cover all the bases, some businesspeople don't identify what they really need to communicate and then target their report, presentation, or memo accordingly. Instead, they throw everything but the kitchen sink at their audience and resort to blanket generalizations because they don't quite know what to do with all the material they've mustered. The result is irrelevant material, unfocused arguments, and bland language that distract and ultimately bore the audience.

Audience members, whether readers or listeners, can take away only a few points, says Warshawsky. Piling on the information results in confusion; for the audience, he says, "it's like going to an ice cream bar and getting every topping put on."

To make your argument more cogent, first take careful stock of what your key message is and identify three or four supporting points. Second, put them together in a logical sequence. Finally, think of a few metaphors that will bring your message alive.

If the project you're talking about is dry or technical, then finding a way to talk about it in terms of something that's more vivid or engrossing will help your argument get heard. Say, for instance, that you are advocating that your unit adopt new energy- and cost-saving measures. Instead of starting off with an appeal to environmental responsibility or the virtues of frugality, you could grab the audience's attention with a compelling comparison that drives home your message: "When you leave computers and lights on overnight at the office, you're opening the company's wallet and burning the bills inside."

"Metaphors are effective because they're the language of instant understanding," Miller says. Because no one wants

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to see money burn, chances are your listeners will reconsider the next time they think they won't bother to shut down their PCs.

A word of caution, however: There's a world of difference between a fresh, original metaphor and a shopworn cliché; using "thinking out of the box," "stepping up to the plate," and the like may very well weaken your argument rather than strengthen it.

### Breaking free

Writing and speaking effectively, says Garner, is "a skill like playing golf. Anybody can play a decent round of golf with enough practice. If you want to do it respectably, you have to devote some time to it." One way to improve is to read more; Ketchum's Schellhardt recommends reading ad copy in consumer magazines.

"Some ad copy is really beautifully written. It's very succinct and uses great metaphors," he says. "People should keep a memo pad just to write

down great phrases that they pick up."

Usage manuals are invaluable. Strunk and White's *The Elements of Style* remains the classic; for nearly 50 years, its witty, pithy, eminently usable advice has steered many a faltering writer into the clear. (A new, illustrated hardback edition has just been released.) For those who want a deeper dive, Garner's *A Dictionary of Modern American Usage* is a must-have.

Both Garner and Warshawsky cite Abraham Lincoln as someone to emulate for his discipline, concision, and ability to incite passion. "Lincoln didn't just suddenly master the English language. He wrote wonderful, down-to-earth language that was very concrete. But he rigorously trained himself to do so," Garner says.

"There's a certain shock value inherent in the Gettysburg Address," Warshawsky says. "If today the president got up and addressed the nation in 270 words, it'd be a top news story. People will pay more attention because you're so brief."

A final point to consider: In keeping your writing and speaking brief, focused, and interesting, you're actually being more courteous to your audience. And, as Warshawsky points out, "Likability goes hand in hand with persuasion. It's much better to try to inform rather than to impress." \*

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