

McNealy Missile – No Acronyms, S. V. P!

Communication should be “clear, concise, and to the ‘pernt’”, as we say in New Jersey. This is true whether it is a Presidential address, a presentation by the Chairman of the Federal Reserve, a business recommendation, or a television commercial. In fact, good, clear communication is one of my **Four Frameworks For Success**¹. However, we often find actual practice at odds with Best Practices.

Sadly, most organizations are awash with internally generated acronyms and jargon. Far from streamlining and accelerating communication, this “alphabet soup” and “work-speak” merely confound, confuse, and contribute to business delays and misunderstanding. This is particularly true in a global business environment, where English may be the operational language, but that does not mean that all participants are operating at the same comprehension level.

Acronyms: Here are two examples that immediately jump to mind.

STD – I reported to the Vice President of Human Resources during part of my corporate career. In this role, I attended Human Resource staff meetings in which the status of various employees was discussed. Notification of employees going on and returning from various leaves was often on the agenda.

I cannot forget my reaction when I heard that employee “X” was returning from “STD”. My two daughters were both teenagers at that time, so our household was bombarded with mailings from their high-school and related organizations on the topic of “**Sexually Transmitted Diseases**”, invariably shorthanded to “STD”. Given the “immediacy effect”, you can imagine my reaction to this employee’s status change. I wondered just how enthusiastically we would welcome them back – possibly from across the room and wearing rubber gloves, with an ample supply of Purell at the ready!

It turns out, the employee was actually returning from “**Short Term Disability**”, but that was certainly not immediately obvious from the nature of the discussion. I kept the Purell handy for Cold and Flu Season anyway.

RIF – “Reading Is Fundamental” is a non-profit program emphasizing reading’s importance for young children, particularly those “at risk” and in underserved communities. Clearly, one of the most important determinants of a student’s academic success and comfort in school is their ability to read and read at, or above, their grade level. **Reading Is Fundamental** is wonderful program, deserving our support.

¹ Please visit **YouTube** under **Rod McNealy** to view video clips detailing the Framework.

Unfortunately, Corporate America, and the “organizational development” consultants who serve it, have coined a new acronym, RIF, with a distinctly different meaning and connotation. In Corporate America, “RIF” means “reduction in force”, and is often used as both a verb and adjective. Thus, what is an extremely uplifting and positive program in one world, becomes the exact opposite in a Corporate context. Therefore, the need to avoid using the acronym in either case, to avoid young children bursting into tears in case a parent has been “RIF’ed”!

Jargon

Jargon appears purposefully created to obfuscate and overly complicate basic communication. I am reminded of Richard Lewis’ portrayal of Prince John in Mel Brooks’ *Robin Hood, Men in Tights*. He demands the Sheriff of Nottingham tell him the bad news of Robin Hood’s return in “a good way”, to make it less painful.

Clearly, this is one purpose of Jargon – to “spin” the truth, so that it becomes less evident, possibly less painful. Another use of Jargon is “Consultant Speak”. This approach takes basic terminology and overly complicates it, thus requiring the consultant to both decipher its meaning for the client and, thereby, provide the consultant with the opportunity to introduce additional jargon and acronyms in the process. Of course, we will have to retain the consultants to further decipher this terminology puzzle, guaranteeing them an ongoing and highly paid sinecure.

Examples

Spin - Actually, most acronyms translate into jargon. “Reduction in Force”, referenced as an acronym above, is a classic. Instead of “firing”, “terminating”, or “ash canning” employees, we “down-size”, “right-size”, or “RIF” them. It sounds so much more caring, but the results are the same. Pink slips and no Christmas!

Consultant Speak - Recently, I was meeting with a client to discuss an upcoming project. My “brief” from the client was to actually take another consultant’s work and apply their recommendation to the organization. So, my beloved client was actually hiring one consultant to implement the work of another consultant!

While I was not told this when initially discussing the project, I immediately unearthed the truth when I read the proposals I was being asked to implement. The document was replete with terms such as “competitive lenses”, “industry orthodoxies”, and “vectors”. In the case of vectors, they were not talking about runways at Newark Liberty International.

In thirty-six years of employment at two global corporations, I had never heard the terms “competitive lenses” or “industry orthodoxies”. I had heard the term “vector”, but only in the context of that wonderful cockpit sequence from the movie *Airplane*.

Only consultants speak this way. Real people crave clarity. Therefore, if you said “through your competitors’ eyes” (competitive lenses) or “common industry practices and beliefs” (industry orthodoxies), you would not need a consultant to decipher this gobbledygook. With “vectors”, I’m still thinking “Runway 5-niner, left, cleared for approach”!

Lessons Learned

1. **Avoid the use of acronyms at all costs.** Particularly true in spoken communication and with an international audience. If you insist on using them in written correspondence, spell out the actual term and place the acronym in parenthesis after it. Do this at least the first two times the term is used.
2. **Do not create a handbook or document of organizational acronyms.** That merely codifies bad practices.
3. **Become a hero and paragon to your peers.** If you want to make more friends than you ever imagined, the next time you are in a presentation where someone persists in using acronyms, politely and publicly ask the speaker exactly what the term means. You will find the majority of the audience was wondering the same thing. They merely lacked the courage to ask, lest they be seen as “out of the loop”. They will revere you for your courage!
4. **Do not tolerate jargon in either internally or externally crafted documents.** Make it clear to all suppliers – including consultants and agencies – that they should use clean, concise language.

We always say that the Creative Brief should read like a poem – every word should have a unique, precise meaning and role. Actually, the same is true for all good communication, written or oral. There should never be the need to parse sentences or ponder meaning.

I always look to the writing of Ernest Hemingway, the words of Abraham Lincoln, or even the biblical phrases attributed to Jesus as examples of clear language. Interestingly, none of these individuals had an extensive formal education, yet their words live and move people as few others have. A lesson for all of us in the communication business.

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