

A Rose by Any Other Name

Remember the game telephone? A group of children sit in a circle; the first child picks a phrase (say "mittens and snowshoes") and whispers it into the ear of the child next to him or her. The process is continued until it reaches the final child in the circle who pronounces the phrase aloud. Due to the vagaries of communication (not to mention the mischievous nature of children), the resulting phrase is gradually transformed to something along the lines of "snorkels and underpants!"

A similar process happens in the workplace everyday. In large organizations and small ones, important information is passed through a chain of command either verbally or in writing, often with little opportunity for after-the-fact clarification of the message being conveyed. Technology and the advent of email usage in the workplace have made this truer than ever before. Therefore, clear communication is vital to an organization's daily operations.

Imagine the following has occurred. Andrew has recently been promoted to director of a company division. He is ambitious and eager to do a good job. He attends his first weekend strategy meeting for the executives where some key ideas are discussed regarding the direction the company intends to take and work towards over the next year. He is excited about the ideas discussed and he feels that he and his department can take the lead. The intention was to have all the executives mull over the strategy and propose suggestions to meet those targets over the course of the next few months. Excited and tired after two long days of meetings and two more to go, Andrew fires off an email to his staff late Saturday night after the close of the day's meeting, announcing changes in his department. The email was short, taken directly out of his notes from the meeting, and read as follows:

"Aggressive measures need to be taken to lower costs immediately, and our department, like many others will be affected. Expect some major changes, and start finding ways immediately to lower costs and show your value to the organization."

Andrew's intention was to have his employees (many of whom check their emails on the weekend) begin thinking about ways to limit their expenses, and look for hidden-value. By the time he returns from the weekend meeting on the following Tuesday, the office is rife with worry, rumors and stress, as many interpreted the email to mean that people were going to lose their jobs. Infighting and positioning had already magnified after only a few days since the email, and the team he had worked hard to build was already beginning to fall apart at the seams ... all because Andrew had not paid attention to, or simply didn't realize the nuances of the language he used and how it could be interpreted when taken out of context.

Effective communication can be a complex matter that requires diligence and practice. A large vocabulary is of course a valuable tool but means little if the message is not clearly framed (as in the aforementioned case of Andrew), or if it is merely used to display superior wordplay. An appreciation of one's audience and the ability to convey a message in language that is clear and concise is crucial. If a foreman told his workers, "The time for culinary respite has now elapsed. Gather your implements and commence with your endeavors, gentleman", this may show off his vocabulary (and raise a few eyebrows), but he'd be much better off to use the simple phrase, "Lunch break is over. Pick up your tools and get to work, fellahs."

More important than an expansive vocabulary or strict use of grammar is the ability to deliver comprehensive information to one's audience. Sometimes this means using language that is common to most people, other times it may mean adapting language to a specific group. While English may be the language common to your business, likely you employ a diverse group of people from different cultural, social or educational backgrounds. In addition, a given discipline often has its own idioms. People from Marketing have their own set of commonly used buzzwords and catchphrases while an IT department has a completely different set. Use of an occupational dialect may serve your needs when these respective departments communicate amongst themselves but will undoubtedly lead to confusion when communicating with each other.

Remember, language is contextual (as in the above example with Andrew, he conveyed the need for cost-cutting, a key company concern, but did not frame it well, which resulted in a great deal of confusion). One essential skill is the ability to gauge how language is used contextually, from both the speaker's and the listener's perspective. Miscommunication in the workplace can have negative consequences of minor or major proportions. Imagine what might happen if a piece of financial information was misinterpreted and then reached the shareholders. The impact could be quite grave indeed.

Fortunately the tradition of "killing the messenger" has long been abandoned. However, it still holds true that if the messenger is unable to make him or herself clearly understood, it's unlikely he or she will be promoted.

A few simple tips to follow:

- Avoid using big words when smaller ones will suffice.
- Always consider your audience and use terminology and analogies appropriate to them.
- Avoid using specialized colloquialisms (ok, guilty as charged...jargon would suffice here). What's common to your inner circle may be gibberish to others.
- Consider the context in which something is being said, and ensure that comments are not taken out of context.



- Whenever possible, provide the opportunity for clarification. Encourage questions and ask the listener to rephrase a complex message in his/her own words.
- For both verbal and written presentations, prepare your text in advance. If possible practice the presentation with a sample audience to obtain feedback.
- Keep a thesaurus and dictionary handy.
- Read! Reading is the simplest and most pleasurable way of increasing our communication skills.