

What's It All About?— Communications and Language

Business is all about communication – well, to be more accurate, business is all about communication and making money, since there would be little point in a business communicating anything if it didn't make any money.

But in an era dominated by technology and communication channels, what once appeared to be a simple process for all businesses has become ever more complex, such that many companies fail miserably in their communication efforts.

Communications is one of those grand sounding words, which can mean everything and nothing at one and the same time. All businesses need to communicate with their employees if they want the best out of them, with suppliers if they want the right raw materials at the best price, with shareholders if they want to keep them on their side, with customers if they want to make any profit at all, and with the community at large since no one – let alone any company – is an island and can act totally unaffected by the community at large.

Successful communication applies equally to manufacturing industries as it does to service sector or public-sector organisations. Everyone is involved in one way or another but the problem is that few people are taught to communicate in a manner that is suitable for business. In social communication we can afford to be sloppy in what we say since in general both parties know one another and can take it that things left unsaid can be taken as read. (When we use the word 'say' we can equally well mean write, of course, or any of the other forms of communicating that we shall be examining in this book.)

But in a business environment, communication has to be clear, precise and unambiguous and, if you want to avoid being bitten in the bum at some later date, it needs to be formal in nature and planned carefully.

Communication – whether it involves organisations, individuals or groups of individuals – requires a minimum of two parties. Although one party may be the initial sender of a message and the other the initial receiver, both sides need to take on both roles if successful communication is to occur. This is because feedback – even if only a nod of the head – is essential if the sender is to get confirmation that a transaction has been completed.

While writing this book, we were driving along a seven-mile stretch of road in Cambridgeshire one evening and outside every single house were bags of rubbish, which had been left out all day waiting for collection from the dustbin men. It was a week after Easter and quite obviously the collection rotas had been changed for that week to take account of the public holidays. We rang up Huntingdon District Council in whose patch this eyesore had occurred to ask them why no one had apparently been told of the changed collection times. ‘We communicated the new collection times to everyone,’ we were told by an officious spokesman in the waste operations department. ‘They were printed quite clearly in the local paper.’ We pointed out that from the look of things, the majority of people obviously didn’t get the local paper. ‘That’s not our fault,’ came the reply. ‘We communicated the dates and times, but if they don’t read the local press, that’s not our fault.’

Need we say more? Actually, the following bank holiday a letter from the council was sent to every household giving the times of the collections – addressed to ‘the Occupier’. So they took it on board.

The ideas communicated can be either verbal or graphical – verbal in the sense of spoken, written or emailed, for instance, and graphical encompassing any message that can be encapsulated as a visual image. After all, we know that a picture can paint a thousand words (and equally that the best television pictures are on radio, where the mind can conjure up detail hugely superior to a mere TV screen.)

Although these direct channels are essential elements of communication, there are a number of other indirect channels that many businesses ignore, but that can be a major source of poor communication if handled improperly. Think of the importance of body language, for instance. We are all very quick to make instant impressions of people by the way they look or the body signals they give off. Someone who is unable to keep eye contact and is always looking away from you is likely to be giving off indirect signals that they are untrustworthy or certainly not someone you can rely upon, even if the real reason is an outward sign of shyness. Indirect communication channels can also include the environment in which the message is being conveyed, or even the relevance of some comment in the context of the whole message.

Communication can also be prevented or minimised by interference that stops a message from getting through. Extraneous noise, be it someone digging up the road outside, or a protester heckling at a meeting, can often divert the receiver's attention from the real message getting through, but interference in the form of preconceptions on the part of the receiver can also play a major role in a lack of comprehension. If your customers don't trust you as a company because of something they may have heard about you, then it may not matter what you say to them because everything you do say will be treated with cynicism or simply not believed.

So barriers can exist in many different forms, but with the commonality of ensuring that core messages are either hindered or stopped altogether from getting through. Although downsizing has recently played a considerable role in making flatter, more responsive organisational structures, the top-down hierarchy – so beloved in former manufacturing industries especially – was divisive in splitting people both horizontally between departments and vertically between the various layers of management. This gave rise to the 'them and us' attitude so prevalent in the heavily unionised industries of the last century.

A further element of this departmental segregation has been that although people may communicate well within their own department, they may not see the overall picture of what the company is

trying to do because they are blinded by the need to fulfil their department's objectives at the expense of other departments that they may see as competitors.

The vertical separators that are epitomised by executive directors devolving power and control to senior managers have only exacerbated the separation between senior directors and the rest of the workforce, resulting in an isolated executive and disgruntled employees, so typified by the nationalised industries that were starting to die out in the 1990s. Yet it's a truism that in many businesses today a large proportion of the people who make up a company have little or no contact with the company's customers and are therefore blind to the problems experienced by the very people who pay their wages – those selfsame customers. Instead, they are too busy fighting for their own position and perks instead of aiming to improve the business generally by serving the customers.

Again, this was typified by the so-called 'fat cat' bosses of the nationalised industries who were on a totally different wavelength from their subordinates, who in their turn distrusted the executives and lapped up the stories of fat-cattery in action as written up in the tabloids. (We remember all too well the CEO of one utility, which is best kept incognito, who quite literally did not know either the name or the position of the person who occupied the office adjacent to his because he used one corridor to access his office while his underling entered the same floor from another doorway. In confidence he admitted that he would feel too embarrassed so late in the day to actually walk around the corridor to find out who was there. 'What if I didn't recognise them?' was his lament!)

The results are clear for anyone who may wish to look. Executives of some companies are well known for communicating their decisions down the corporate ladder with little comprehension of what the impact of those decisions will be, either on the company or on the people who have to implement those decisions. This may well be backed up by executives who fail to adhere to the values they set others and who fail to set measurable performance yardsticks by which others can measure success. In other words, they are bad leaders.

The corollary of this is that managers lack enthusiasm for change; since they have no means of measuring their effectiveness, they may feel stressed in even implementing the executives' wishes. The result is that the rest of the workforce feel unappreciated, have no clear focus and, in that well-worn phrase, feel like mushrooms – left in the dark and having manure thrown at them from on high.

Positive communications cannot survive in a world of hidden and suppressed personal feelings since we all have feelings and everything we do or say is controlled by those feelings. It is surely much better to harness and understand people's feelings and use them in a positive way to help the communication process. After all, even anger is an expression of frustration, and emotional needs have a habit of expressing themselves in one way or another. For open communications to work we need to communicate both positive and negative feelings, since bottling it all up is bound to lead to an explosion at a later time. So it is important to understand that immediate reactions to problems often disguise deeper feelings, which need to be unlocked.

Mind Your Language

Even before the tower of Babel, language has been at the heart of communication. We have all learned to talk from birth and we all think we are terribly good at it. What could be more natural or easier than something we've all done since day one?

Unfortunately, the reality is different. Most of us don't have to cogitate very long to think of people we know who are anything but good communicators.

There are several reasons or categories they fall into – noting that the first three are personal and may not be always correctable, but do cause misunderstandings:

- Speech impediment – whatever its cause this is bound to create a difficulty in comprehension by others.
- Not using their mother tongue, which leads to use of inappropriate tenses, declensions and conjugations.

- Strong regional accents or differences in the use of language on a regional basis.

The correctable areas, which need to be addressed, are:

- Talking in jargon – which most specialist groups tend to do.
- Talking *at* the person with whom they are trying to communicate – but communication, by definition, is a two-way process.
- Malapropisms or misuse of the language out of ignorance – we recently heard a manager regaling a bemused group of builders about the ‘JCBs’ holding up load-bearing walls.
- Highfalutin or inappropriate use of long or impressive sounding words in order to gain the upper ground – we all know this is simply a load of floccinaucinihilipilification!

It’s awful to have a communication problem, but the greater problem is that most of us don’t think we have one! Everyone has their jargon and other people are excluded from full understanding of it – mainly their clients or prospective clients. After all, why else would they go to an expert at all? Because they don’t know – or don’t know enough. Therein lies the need to follow the route to specialists and to money changing hands. ’Tis life, and it makes the world go round.

Take the legal profession, for instance. A more impenetrable minefield for the unwary is hard to imagine. Lawyers and solicitors appear to understand one another, but to the outsider it can all seem unfathomable and can generate mistrust, at the worst, and crossed wires at the very least. Keith Turner, of Northampton-based Turner Coulston, explains it this way:

We understand what we’re talking about and we have our own language. The trouble is that the public think that the language we use is English, but the truth is that it’s not English. It is a legal language, which is designed to be unambiguous, and we use words, the meaning of which we know; whereas if we use colloquial language you can’t be sure how a Court will interpret the words. Consequently, we tend to use this specialised language, which looks like English.

Now it's awfully hard for the lawyer who uses it as a matter of course to understand that the client doesn't understand what he's actually saying. I frequently send documents to people, thinking that I've written them in absolutely plain English – easy to understand – but people then say, 'I can't understand this. It's too difficult.' I try to use commas and not to use heretofores and so on unless I'm writing a document, which is only being read between solicitors. If it is, then it seems to me I can use technical language if I want.

We try really hard to write it in plain English but it is very hard to do so because otherwise you could spend ages trying to think of another way of saying a sentence (which increases the bill), whereas you can say it quickly and cheaply by using a phrase that you know has a particular meaning.

However, Keith Turner has an answer to the problem of understanding legalese.

I've found that if you want to understand a legal document, the easiest way to do it is to read it out loud – even if it has a lack of punctuation – because the brain puts the punctuation in; and it's incredible how much easier it is to understand if it's read out loud. I say to clients, 'If you're having a problem, read it out loud first and see if it makes sense.' Most times it does.

But people get fazed. It's rather like a long German word. I have absolutely no idea how to start pronouncing it because it seems to go on for ever. It's the same with a legal sentence. The paragraph is 'this long' and your brain is effectively frightened looking at the detail and you automatically jump and can't make sense of it.

A barrister, whom we shall call Nicholas Slater, put it to us this way:

Here's a very short example of something that is impenetrable, however many times you read it. If you're a company lawyer then it may be OK. Even in context it's bad enough. This is a prohibition against giving financial assistance between one related company and another.

Companies Act 1985 Pt V, Ch VI, s155 (5):

Where the financial assistance is to be given by the company in a case where the acquisition of shares in question is or was an acquisition of shares in its holding company, that holding company and any other company which is both the company's holding company and a subsidiary of that other holding company (except, in any case, a company which is a wholly-owned subsidiary) shall also approve by special resolution in general meeting the giving of the financial assistance.

This makes much more sense if you give it the common sense approach of Keith Turner.

Nicholas Slater continued:

The advice you give to anybody to be an effective communicator is first, be sure to get the terms right or second, communicate within your own terms or else third, don't communicate at all. Don't start borrowing anybody else's jargon because you'll always get it wrong. A little learning is a dangerous thing. Some jargon is there to keep outsiders out. Some of it is there because it actually saves a lot of time. It's shorthand for everyone who is 'in'. For instance when a lawyer says, 'We have given our clients certain advice' it actually means 'We're on a hiding to nothing and we know it.'

Do you know the difference between misfeasance, malfeasance and nonfeasance? Misfeasance is doing the wrong thing, malfeasance is doing the right thing but badly and nonfeasance is not doing it at all.

People who use language wrongly usually do so because they think they've got it right. People who talk about 'criteria' and 'phenomena' in the singular think they're being smart and educated and so do people who think 'appraise' means 'apprise'.

Mind you, there are often common-or-garden misquotes . . . I remember in the Court of Appeal when my witness had said, 'I felt as if the sword of Damocles was hanging over my head.'

This came up in the transcript as 'as if a sort of pantybose was banging over my head'! Even the judge found this hilarious. Ignorance sets the balance as you attempt to correct things.

Litigants-in-person appear to be a special breed. Nicholas Slater told us a wonderful story about a 'Mr Gresham' who had been rabbiting away in the Court of Appeal for about an hour when the presiding judge stopped him and said, 'We've been listening with great interest to your submissions but what interests us is the reference that you keep making to the allegations. It would help us if you would be so kind as to identify where those allegations are to be found and who it is who is making them.' And he said, 'My lords, the allegations to which I was alluding to are those at page 64 of the written submissions, and I am the alligator'!

As the French expression goes: '*C'est plus facile à parler, qu'à dire quelque chose*', which loosely translated means, 'It's easier to talk than to say something.'

'With respect' is one of those lovely little phrases that means exactly the opposite; just like 'it gives me no pleasure to' – which means 'I'm absolutely thrilled to bits'! Or 'I hear what you say', which means, 'If you say so, but we both know that it's absolute nonsense.'

He continued:

Lawyers will often say 'I am instructed . . .' which means, 'I know this is nonsense, but that's what I've been told to do.' It's like criminals saying 'to be perfectly honest'. I used, in my criminal days, to say. 'Don't say that whatever you do'. Or 'To tell you the truth, gov!' No! No! No! And it's the same between the lawyers themselves. 'As your lordship pleases' means 'I hate you and if you weren't sitting there I'd sort you out!' But of course, judges never make mistakes, as you'd learn if you went to the Court of Appeal. Instead they 'fall into error'.

In a recent case where three different versions of an affidavit had been signed by a defendant, after a lengthy trial containing many conflicting claims by that same defendant, the judge stated in his summary that he had been 'a totally unreliable witness' – which is a very gentle and coded way of saying that he was an out-and-out liar.

But every discipline has its jargon. For instance within banks, following a credit reference request, the receiving bank will respond with coded language for which they cannot be sued, but which makes very clear the financial viability of their client. ‘Respectable and trustworthy and good for your figures and purpose’ means simply that you’re OK and they’ve never had any problem with you. ‘Respectable and trustworthy’ means a slightly less endorsed financial statement whereas ‘We are sure that our clients would not commit themselves beyond that which they could see their way clear to fulfil’ tells all. The bank is not at all happy about this one.

Likewise the messages put on returned cheques, ‘Refer to drawer, please represent’ means that he hasn’t got the funds at the moment but he probably will have when you present the cheque again. ‘Refer to drawer’ shuts the door because this client has played the numbers game too often and has simply run out of plausibility rope as far as the bank is concerned.

But back to plain English, because therein lies our comfort zone. Unfortunately we all think that what we say makes sense, but language is full of ambiguity.

Take the word ‘by’ as used in ‘by 1 April’. Does that mean before 1 April starts or on and including 1 April? And what if you live in Yorkshire, where the word ‘while’ has come to be used to replace ‘until’? For instance, a Tyke may well tell you, ‘I’ll be here while seven o’clock.’ And it doesn’t take too much brainpower for you to realise that he will be there until seven o’clock. So what happens, you may well ask, when a Yorkshire mum teaches her children not to cross the road at the pelican crossing ‘while the green man is flashing’?

Likewise in Wales, there is a different usage of the word ‘tidy’ from that in the rest of the English-speaking world. People buy and wear clothes ‘for tidy’ – or as some might say ‘for Sunday best’.

In America if something is ‘slated’ then it is put on the table as being something good to be considered – pretty well the opposite of the meaning found on this side of the Pond.

Linguistic misunderstandings can so easily occur if we remember what Humpty Dumpty said in *Alice in Wonderland*: ‘When I use a word, it means just what I choose it to mean – neither more nor less.’

By this alone the response of 'OK' to a statement made in an e-mail could, for instance, mean 'OK, I'll think about it.' Or 'OK, I agree with you.' Depending on what you take the response to mean, your subsequent actions will be totally different, which could lead to totally different outcomes.

Language is at the core of all communications. Roger White, Director of Corporate Affairs at PricewaterhouseCoopers, sums it up like this:

With any use of language keep it simple. Don't over-complicate. Don't get buried in jargon. That's why everybody thinks that doing communications or PR is easy. Everybody thinks that they can do it. But they can't necessarily. When it's done well it looks easy, but it isn't. Usually if you have done it well it's because you have done it simply.

So let's return to the lawyers for them to have the last word – for they often do:

There was a young barrister making an impassioned plea in a dog destruction case. The magistrates were going to sentence the dog to death and this young man was saying, 'This isn't the sort of dog that deserves to be put down. Just look at this photograph, and say to yourself, "Is Stan the kind of dog that needs to be taken away from its owner?" Of course he's not. What could be sweeter, what could be nicer, more English, more docile than the very name Stan? Does it not convey to your worships a dog in the bosom of his family running happily around the garden, curling up in his master's lap in the evening in front of the fire, with his loyal loving look and his tender brown eyes? Could you bring yourselves to condemn a dog called Stan?'

And the dock officer said, 'I think I should just point out to your worships and counsel that you may be under a misapprehension. I think there's been a typing error in his instructions. The dog is in fact called Satan.'