Dirty Words

What not to say to executives • BY JAY CROSS

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This year I led workshops in London, Madrid, San Jose, Quebec and Berlin on how to sell informal learning to senior management. Top executives have little time, so it's important to have a one-minute elevator pitch ready for chance encounters with them. The workshops culminated in everyone role-playing that interaction.

We all know that you shouldn't use training jargon (Kirkpatrick levels, Gagne, kinesthetic) when talking to executives. Many CLOs fail to realize that they also should purge other common words from their vocabularies because they trigger negative thoughts among decision makers.

Comedian George Carlin had a skit about the seven words you were not allowed to say on television. Most of them are four letters long. His words were dirty; mine are bad for business.

"Learning" is a dirty word because executives have a hard time hearing it. You think of improving skills and increasing knowledge. They think of classes, teachers and school. They remember how ineffective school was at getting things done and believe that most lessons are forgotten before you have a chance to use them. Learning taints the conversation. Better to speak of collaboration or boosting brain power. I changed the name of my new book from *Informal Learning in the Cloud* to *Work Smarter.*

"Learner" is banned because no one but the training community uses the term. They are workers first, learners second. Talking about learners conjures up the bad old days of taking people off the job to learn. Increasingly, learning takes place on the job. In fact, I foresee work and learning converging at an astonishing rate.

Social learning is the hottest thing since electricity among Web enthusiasts. However, MIT's Andy McAfee warns that executives who hear the word "social" see scenes of Woodstock and other non-business activities.

Likewise, executives hear the word "informal" and take it to mean haphazard. Most job-related learning is informal, and there are enormous opportunities to make it better. Collaborative networks, expertise locators, reducing fear of failure, graphic design, workspace architecture and many other techniques increase the productivity of informal learning. Better call it collaboration if you want to sell it.

"Knowledge management" may be two words, but it's a single concept. That concept is broken. Knowledge is inherently unmanageable. Traditional top-down KM has failed over and over again. It's based on the assumption that an elite can figure out what workers need to know, package it as explicit data and serve it up in a database. Most of the knowledge that workers seek is tacit and beyond the reach of database systems. The smart money is betting on bottom-up knowledge bases, compiled and maintained by the people who use them. By the way, I also contend that you can't manage talent and that learning management systems do not manage learning.

You have probably stopped using the word "training," but just in case, let's review why it's inappropriate. Training is something you do to someone. Learning is something people do for themselves. You hope that people learn from training, for that's the objective. Talking about training can blind you to alternative means of learning.

Despite growing evidence that e-learning can produce superior results compared to the classroom, early failures sullied its reputation. E-learning circa 1999 was, for the most part, deadly dull and uninspiring. People stayed away in droves. Completing an e-learning course was the exception rather than the rule. Avoiding e-learning because of a bad early experience is like going to one bad movie and saying you'll never go to another one of those because movies are bad.

It's better to talk about cost-benefit analysis or meeting specific goals than to speak of ROI. Many managers use the strict accounting definition of returns: changes in the assets and liabilities on the balance sheet. Accounting is increasingly the wrong yardstick. The majority of value generated by businesses is intangible. It's social capital, know-how, patents and relationships. Traditional ROI fails to measure the most valuable returns.

People who banter about Web 3.0 betray their lack of understanding of what's going on. 3.0 would be the linear progression that characterizes software releases. The 2.0 of Web 2.0 that author and publisher Tim O'Reilly described wasn't a version number. Rather, it signaled that the Web did not die in the dot-com bust. The bubble took down many overly enthusiastic investors, but the Internet kept right on improving. Now we are entering an era where the benefits of the Web will grow exponentially. O'Reilly calls what's coming Web^2. CLO