

Why Businesspeople

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These days, there is tremendous focus on speaking plain English and avoiding jargon that can leave the audience completely baffled. Although this is a challenge in almost any occupation, it is certainly a serious problem in our own profession.

There has probably been no article more devastating to the human resources profession than one that appeared in the August 2005 issue of *Fast Company* magazine. In this article, "Why We Hate HR," author Keith H. Hammonds described the many serious problems facing the HR profession. Among those was our love of and infatuation with terms, phrases and communication that seem to make little sense to anyone. In this article, the writer describes a presentation at a major conference. The presentation, "From Technicians to Consultants: How to Transform Your HR Staff Into Strategic Business Partners," focused on issues that were both puzzling and confusing. The presenter talked about "internal action learning" and "being more playful in my approach." She described initiatives in performance management, organizational design and horizontal-solutions teams. The presenter also discussed leveraging internal resources and involving external resources. The presentation left the audience dazed. That evening as the author mingled with the other HR pros, they all agreed that they didn't understand much of the presentation either.

Unfortunately, our profession has latched onto too much jargon, often leaving many of our strongest supporters in the management team wondering what we're saying, and even what we're doing. But help is on the way in the form of books and even software. Yes, software — software that was announced on CNN's Moneyline with Lou Dobbs. According to Dobbs, "A new software program sends a clear message to corporate America: Cut out the bull. New York-based Deloitte Consulting admits it helped foster confusing, indecipherable words like 'synergy,' 'paradigm' and 'extensible repository,' but now has decided enough is enough. The company has released 'Bullfighter' to help writers of business documents avoid jargon and use clear language."

In addition, a team from Deloitte has written an important business book, "Why Business People Speak Like Idiots: A Bullfighter's Guide." This major book gets at the heart of jargon, wordiness and evasiveness, which the authors characterize as active ingredients in modern business-speak. Consider, for example, this excerpt from Enron's 2000 annual report:

"Enron's performance in 2000 was a success by any measure, as we continued to outdistance the competition and solidify our leadership in each of our major businesses. We have robust networks of strategic assets that we own or have contractual access to, which give us greater flexibility and speed to reliably deliver widespread logistical solutions. ... We have metamorphosed from an asset-based pipeline and power generating company to a marketing and logistics company whose biggest assets are its well-established business approach and its innovative people."

Obviously, this is difficult to understand. This trend in foggy writing led the authors of this book to conduct an experiment. They set up a research shop of sorts at a Starbucks location, where they asked customers to view one of two actual company writing samples. One sample was written in straight and clear language, and the other was typical corporate speak such as the example above from Enron. They asked the same people to select, from a list of 30 common psychological traits (15 "good" and 15 "bad"), which traits they would associate with each source. Not surprisingly, the audience didn't like the "bull" sample. Obnoxious and rude were two of the four traits they assigned to the "bull" excerpt. Other bad traits associated with the "bull" passage were stubborn and unreliable. None of the 15 good traits were associated with the bull example.

The straight-talking example fared much better, with five of the good traits (likable, energetic, friendly, inspiring and enthusiastic) positively correlated with straight talk.

One reason why business people speak like idiots is that they use 50-cent words to make a five-cent point, the authors proclaim. That's why we say things such as "initiate project action plan" rather than "let's get started." We fear that straightforward language might make us look dumb. The Starbucks study showed just the opposite. Intelligent and educated were two of the 30 traits studied. The study showed there was no statistical difference between the straight-talk sample and the bull sample on these two traits. Thus there is no payoff for verbosity.

The long sentences we use are also culprits. In the 1940s, researcher Dr. Rudolph Flesch developed a document

Speak Like Idiots



Photograph by Matthew Taplinger

readability index to rate how easy or difficult it is to read various text. It suggests that sentences longer than 21 words are very challenging to read. Flesch's scores are plotted on a scale of 0 to 100, with 100 being the easiest to read. Here are some examples he calculated to show his formula in practice:

- Comics: 92
- *Sports Illustrated*: 63
- *Wall Street Journal*: 43
- IRS tax code: -6

Obviously, different scores are appropriate for different audiences. The real issue with long-windedness is that it prevents writers from connecting with their audience. One easy fix is to use short sentences. They usually pack a punch. They are also more memorable than long ones. One-word sentences

can build momentum and give longer sentences impact. History is full of great speeches, from those of Abraham Lincoln to Winston Churchill, that prove these very points.

Those in our own profession might be some of the worst offenders at misspeak or speaking like idiots. Pop into any major conference and listen to a few presentations, and this becomes quite clear. We like to use jargon and long, incomprehensible sentences, and have trouble with straightforward language. Just imagine a group of operating executives sitting in the audience. Would you make the same presentation? Would their presentations have the same jargon? The same confusing terminology? I hope not.

In our own work, we have been forced into this in some cases and have succumbed to industry pressures on others. We've had clients who have asked us for value propositions instead of proposals. Others characterize our work as "monetizing learn-

ing and development,” which is not necessarily what we do. Still others have long since given up on the term “business measures” and instead prefer “metrics.” Some use the even more confusing term “learning analytics.” When we can’t speak in the terms that operating managers and executives know and understand, we try to invent some new term or word that makes it appear that we have something new and insightful to say, when in reality, we might not.

The book “Why Business People Speak Like Idiots” is a recommended read. It is humorous, it flows quickly, and will strike a very familiar tone in our profession. The book concludes with a bull spotters guide, a list of about 100 very common “bull” words and expressions. A few of my personal favorites, and the authors’ comments on the words, are:

- **Bandwidth:** Formerly “time,” as in “I don’t have the bandwidth to complete any value-added action items.” Another case of business assuming a kind of tech savvy that it doesn’t have.

competencies,” or “monetize the transformational outcomes.” You know, “monetize.” (Unless you’re working in a mint, coining money, this is a great word to never use again.)

- **Parking lot:** In meetings, a sheet of flipchart paper that contains the questions the presenters don’t want to answer. The parking-lot metaphor would work only if every time you parked your car, someone towed it away and sent it to the crusher.

- **Push the envelope:** Figuratively, do something better than it has ever been done before. But usually used to describe a competent job at any suitably obscure task.

- **Repurpose:** Usually affixed to “knowledge capital” or some other overblown bull term, but really means nothing more than “reuse.”

- **Thought leadership:** It might sound impossibly arrogant to say that we’re smarter than everyone else and are solely qualified to serve as a model for everyone’s thought processes regarding a given topic. But apparently it’s not impossible.

- **Value add:** The ultimate marketing hype in a convenient noun. Doesn’t say anything, but promises that the result will make something more valuable. Doesn’t say what will be more valuable or why, but does promise a positive outcome. Doesn’t quantify that outcome, but at least you know you’re getting a value add.

- **Value proposition:** The reason for doing something, but with an aura of accounting legitimacy without the inconvenience of actual hard numbers of accountants.

- **Win-win:** Cheerleading, hard-sell, “Kumbaya” bull. Otherwise no problems with this charming expression.

- **World-class:** Whenever someone has to affix the “world-class” label to anything, rest assured it isn’t.

So when you’re out of the loop in a high-touch world with less bandwidth than the best of breed and you need some impactful, mission-critical comments, stop. Remember your audience and your message. And together, let’s drop the bull, eliminate the jargon and try to shoot straight with our audiences. They deserve it, you deserve it, and our profession deserves it. ■

Further reading

“Crimes Against Logic: Exposing the Bogus Arguments of Politicians, Priests, Journalists, and Other Social Offenders,” by Jaimie Whyte. McGraw-Hill, 2004.

“The Dictionary of Corporate Bullsh_t: An A to Z Lexicon of Empty, Enraging, and Just Plain Stupid Office Talk,” by Lois Beckwith. Broadway Books, 2006.

“On Bullsh_t,” by Harry G. Frankfurt. Princeton University Press, 2005.

“Truth, Knowledge, or Just Plain Bull: How to Tell the Difference,” by Bernard M. Patten. Prometheus Books, 2004.

“Why Business People Speak Like Idiots: A Bullfighter’s Guide,” by Brian Fugere, Chelsea Hardaway, and John Washawsky. Free Press, 2005.

“Your Call is Important to Us: The Truth About Bullsh_t,” by Laura Penny. Crown Publishers, 2005.

- **Center of excellence:** Vortex of incomparable splendor, hub of magnificence, apex of awesomeness, whatever. No one likes anyone who works in any of these.

- **Change agent:** Before sports envy took hold, Ian Fleming was the patron saint of business. Much like SMERSH, the murder organization outwitted by Fleming’s superspy James Bond, our agents will infiltrate the organization and complete the mission.

- **Go-live:** Captures the intense drama of using a new computer system on Monday. Also says a lot about whoever thinks this is an exciting event.

- **Incentivise:** Like “incent,” but with more syllables, more letters and a sort of intellectualish aura, kind of.

- **Monetize:** As in “monetize our extensible

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