BE CAREFUL WITH THAT PLAIN LANGUAGE BLUDGEON

BY

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There is a scene in the movie, *The Verdict*. A doctor, being sued for malpractice, practices his testimony. "She'd aspirated vomitice into her mask," he says. His lawyer coaches: "She threw up in her mask. Cut the bullshit, please. Just say it." I have no doubt this would resonate with many senior executives, HR people, coaches, and communications types who want to get the bullshit (technical jargon) out of business communications.

It's hard not to agree. Jargon obfuscates, particularly when levelled at people not versed in its meaning, use, and purpose. Think about a PhD prattling on with insider language about literary criticism, biomechanical functioning, or physics. What about the person with a large vocabulary showing off by tossing arcane words and Latin into conversation. It's all language being used to project superiority.

Such willful confusing does nothing to advance the cause of the discussion. After all, if the receiver doesn't understand, failure to communicate is certain and misunderstanding inevitable.

It's much easier to disagree with how the strident executive demand to speak plainly and eradicate jargon is being used to democratize incompetence exactly where domain expertise is needed.

Let's return to the movie dialogue. Yes, the doctor was using a high falutin' doctor word ("aspirated") that could readily be replaced by the much more plain spoken alternative ("threw up"). Obviously the doctor's choice of (wrong) word was to neutralize perception. ("Aspirating" sounds like something medically normal and "vomitice" is a softer, clinical form of vomit; whereas everyone knows that throwing up is the body's response to something wrong and that aspirating it is how troubled entertainers tend to depart this mortal coil.) In the context of an educated doctor and a group of twelve jurors, likely none of whom would be similarly comfortable with the clinical words, it's fair to suppose confusion would reign. The plain spoken alternative is justified.

What if the context is no longer a jury of twelve average people but a meeting of doctors and hospital administrators? Is it reasonable to expect those with a direct hand in the performance and management of medical treatment to be more precise in their use of special language?

Assume our answer is "Yes." If so, the equivalence within a large organization is that those responsible for and leading its functions would be better than familiar with the "jargon" specific to what they are leading. Presumably executives at General Motors are abundantly familiar with horsepower, torque ratios, and such so that the organization could function at the appropriate level. (How would one render "torque ratio" more plain?) Should senior executives responsible for keeping trains moving at railroad companies not be sufficiently familiar with the intricacies of their organizations' objects to speak to the *inside ball*. Why should it be different for technology?

That is, why should it be different for (senior) executives with responsibility for businesses being dramatically affected by digitization to not be sufficiently educated, aware, and conversant in the language so that they feel obliged to demand jargon-free plain language to understand? They should not. Their only challenge is to deal with jargon that is hiding something.

I have experienced the pretense of jargon-eradicating plain language demands used in both ways: to strip away the buffer of obfuscation, as well as to compensate for inadequacy. I have no proof, but sense it happens more for the latter reason. An executive who demands clarity to ensure the communicator can express him/herself without relying on specialty language then reverts to the level of discussion for domain-competent people, is probing for knowledge and completeness of thought. Where the complaint is a blunt "too much jargon" or such, followed by discussion that wanes away from the needed industrial, functional, or contextual precision, it's testament to a senior person insufficiently competent in the domain (s)he has been tasked to lead.

The idea of professional management is the mistaken belief that anybody sufficiently clever (to get an MBA) or politically astute to be promoted to a senior leadership role can lead any part of an organization. In fact, many corporate HR programs are designed to broaden executives without educating them for roles where they are unprepared to be conversant with the functional aspects of the domain. That does nobody any good.

I have found too many senior executives don't care to admit they are in waters where they are just keeping their noses in air let alone swimming or helping others. That is not meant to diminish any individual: (s)he would have to be very smart to pick up the new, expert domain's nuances. But, rather than rallying an organization of HR and Communications people to terrorize those with specialty knowledge to be more plain

spoken and jargon-free to cover for inadequacy, it should be incumbent upon everyone—especially executives responsible for domains requiring specialty knowledge—to get sufficiently educated. This fundamental need particularly applies to digital for obvious reasons and, since digital affects everything, to everyone.

While it's unlikely that a star manager will ever become as knowledgeable as an engineer or coder or car designer or what have you if (s)he did not come from that domain, a good start would be to learn the language and basic fundamentals. Whether you choose to use "aspirated vomitice" or "threw up" or even "barfed," is your choice depending on your context. But as a leader where this is relevant, you need to be able to handle the specialty language of your domain—or trust implicitly in someone who does.

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