

Don't Let Jargon Destroy Your Message

By Tom Ahern


Webster defines “jargon” as language that’s particular to a specific group and is often hard for those outside that group to understand. Most of us use jargon when we’re talking with others in our profession.

If, for example, our work is around feeding people who are hungry, we may talk about “food insecurity” or “food injustice.” If we work with people leaving prison, we may talk about “transitioning from incarceration,” “recidivism rates” or “ex-offenders.” I’ve been guilty of using jargon in my work too; I talk about “capacity building, being donor-centric,” or “targeting stakeholders.”

Such language is vague, which limits its ability to persuade. “We provide transitional housing,” for instance, does little to stir emotions. “Our donors help people get into homes after a fire, flood, or other crisis” creates a more vivid picture.

Jargon works when you’re speaking with others who consistently work in your field. If you’re a social worker talking to another social worker about “trauma informed parenting,” you’re using language you both understand. But, if you’re speaking to someone who wants to understand your work, you won’t get there by using industry jargon.

When jargon is in play, recipients assign their own meanings to the word. For example, “intervention” means one thing in a clinical setting, but might be perceived as “interference” by someone unfamiliar with your intended meaning.

To really connect with your audience – and to avoid misunderstandings and misperceptions – your stories must be authentic, emotional, and impassioned. You’ll never get that reaction if you use language that’s been stripped of its emotional context and its reference to people. 

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“Donors are absent from almost all things nonprofits say about themselves.”

“Intervention” might be perceived as “interference.”



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[We Are Made for Story](#) (Vol. 37, No. 4)

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