

How Jargon Undermines Communication

Are you a victim of Vapidity Syndrome? Take this quiz to find out.

“After the proactive reengineering initiative is championed and we’ve achieved maximum synergy, competitive dynamics and globalization effectiveness will empower our human capital to conquer a new paradigm, delight customers, and achieve World Class onboarding in our space.”

Um... what?

We can laugh at garbage like this, but such muddled communication is standard-issue in many organizations. When the language you choose is meaningless or vague, you aren’t giving information people can act on.

The High Costs of Lazy Jargon

Individuals who communicate with these lifeless, unclear words are missing opportunities to help others do their jobs more effectively. They’re creating distance rather than connection.

The costs of using vapid jargon are painful and measurable. They include:

- **confusion** about what’s expected from employees
- **inaccurate information** filling the voids created by the lack of truthful, honest communication
- **employee mistrust**, poor morale, and low productivity
- **decreased credibility** with employees, vendors, and customers

A Communication Checklist

- **Do you take care** to communicate with clarity, honesty, and respect?
- **Do you clarify your assumptions** by asking questions and checking facts?
- **How do others feel** after you’ve communicated with them? Do they feel better or worse, clear or confused, capable or inept?
- **Do you listen** with full attention not only to words but to body language and other nonverbal signals?
- **How do you respond** when you perceive that someone has been rude or disrespectful to you? Are you compassionately firm, gently calling their attention to your perception that they’ve been curt, rude, or unclear?
- **Do you use — or withhold — words** in ways that hurt or shortchange others? Do you interrupt, lie, blame, ignore e-mail and phone messages, or hold back information someone needs?
- **Do you model** skillful communication? Do you practice what you preach?

- **multiple meanings** for the same term, causing confusion over the precise action to be taken
- **ineffective marketing and fundraising.**

Who Opened This Pandora’s Box?

We communicators have to stretch our minds and stop resorting to lazy communication, where we might be tempted to recycle jargon or our favorite terms. Just because everyone else is misusing a term doesn’t mean you have to.

How do you recognize empty or overused words, and then avoid using them? Looking for them and asking questions is a good first step. Ask yourself to define what you mean, and ask others to define the words they use. Probe for details. Be sure that you and your audience attach the same meaning to those words.

Instead of using jargon, look for another way to express your thoughts, or provide tangible examples to help make your meaning clear. Choose specific, meaningful words in every instance.

Overusing or misusing words aren’t the only examples of Vapidity Syndrome. Lack of action or inconsistent action creates meaningless words and phrases, too. For example, if you’re prone to saying, “I’ll return your call right away” and typically don’t until days later, you’ve drained your words of meaning and damaged your credibility.

Test Your V.Q. (Vapidity Quotient)

Draw a line connecting the jargon in column A with its plainer-speaking match in column B.

Column A

- interface
- onboarding
- bandwidth
- human capital
- intellectual assets
- infrastructure
- churn
- world-class
- off the grid
- space

Column B

- employee turnover
- excellent
- ideas
- systems and equipment
- meet
- not available
- niche
- time and resources
- employees
- hiring and training

Answers:

1-10 ~ 9-1 ~ 2-4 ~ 1-8 ~ 4-1 ~ 3-9 ~ 6-8 ~ 10-1 ~ 9 ~ 2-5

If you frequently use these terms or other jargon, ask yourself why you’re using vapid words instead of communicating more clearly. What other jargon terms do you use? Replace them with words most people would understand. ■