

# What did you say: Why big words & jargon don't make sense

Perspective on People:  
By Karen Friedman

Whenever we prepare for coaching or training, we send participants a very basic questionnaire so we can get to know them, their concerns and communication challenges before we walk in the room. Their answers are typically very telling and help us customize programs for specific individuals and teams.

So here I am, plowing through a bunch of questionnaires for an upcoming media training with physicians when the 'aha' moment shouts at me from the form.

The question reads: 'what are the hottest trends that you are noticing in your area of expertise?' The answer: 'morcelallation'. I thought it was a typo and spell check on my computer indicated as much. When I looked it up, I found it's a very high tech controversial procedure used to remove uterine fibroids.

The next question asked 'what do you think makes a win/win during an interview?' The answer: 'dissemination of data'.

A good interview is not about the dissemination or distribution of data. A good interview like good communication occurs when the communicator considers his or

her audience and takes the time to put information in terms they will understand. That means eliminating jargon.

If this physician is talking to other obstetricians, then there is no need to explain medical terms specific to their business. All too often however, the communicator blames the listener for lack of understanding when he or she has no one to blame but themselves.

In the best-selling book *Why business people speak like idiots*, Brian Fugere and his co-authors make a repeated point that the smartest people use the dumbest words. While words like 'dissemination' and 'morcelallation' are not dumb words, they are meaningless words to certain audiences.

Your job as a communicator is not to show off how smart you are. Your job is to make sense of information which means putting that information in context and perspective.

When I shared that sentiment at a messaging session just last week, one individual argued that "our business is different." He went on to say that his profession requires a greater level of details than others. No it doesn't. Academia, technology, pharmaceutical research, as-



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tronomy, biology all require great levels of detail. So does physics, internet coding, gene therapy, app development, surgical procedures and environmental issues.

Explaining complicated information in internal verbiage rather

than words you might use if you were having a conversation with a smart neighbor who isn't versed in your business is simply rude. It says you care more about you than the people you're talking to because your focus is on impressing, not informing.

Jargon also questions your audience's intelligence. That's right. Big words can insult your audience by suggesting you don't trust them enough to speak simply. "But I don't want to dumb it down" is what I frequently hear from clients. Does dumbing it down mean taking a few extra minutes to think through how to make sense of information?

If you've ever listened to a eulogy, then you understand where I'm coming from. No one stands up there and says: "Sally was an amazing homo-sapien who excelled at flexibility and responsiveness." Instead, they say "Sally was an amazing woman who never said no and put her family first."

Work should be no different. Instead of speaking about "integrated logistical contingencies", why not just say combining plans to handle the unexpected and make us more responsive.

Taking the time to create presentations or deliver talks that are shorter, punchier and jargon free is more time consuming than spitting out a bunch of gobbledygook that you think will impress listeners.

Recently, I worked with a woman who had a five minute opportunity to convince the C-suite to fund a new expense tracking system. She practiced in front of me. To paraphrase, here is what she said:

"I want to talk to you about a new way we want to log expenses. First I'm going to take you through the program and then I will show you how you would be able to enter your receipts. When entering a receipt, you would first click here on the upper right hand side of your screen which brings up a box. When you open the box, you'll see another screen. It's complicated at first, but once you use it, it will get easier....." Clearly I tuned out.

So I put on my former reporter hat and started asking her questions:

Question: How many hours each month does it take employees to enter expenses?

Answer: Four hours per person.

Question: How many people work at your company?

Answer: 500.

Question: How many hours would they save if a new system is implemented?

Answer: One hour per person

As we continued, she revealed that at approximately \$20.00 per hour, the company would save 1500 hours per month equaling \$30,000.00 per month or \$360,000.00 per year. Saying that is far more meaningful to executives making spending decisions.

Like a television news report, reporters put you at the scene. You feel what they felt, see what they saw, touch what they touched and smell what they smelled. They create an experience. When the late Steve Jobs unveiled the iPhone, he didn't bore you with memory capacity and processing speeds. He used words like "cool" and "amazing". He said: "Today Apple is going to reinvent the phone."

You didn't have to dissect what he meant.

Communicating is not about talking. Communicating is about connecting. So the next time you come up with endless excuses about why you need to use big words, create long slides with lots of text or write a four page e-mail that no one ever really reads, think about your purpose. Is this about you or them? If it's about you, start over.

Instead of trying to presenting yourself as a decisive intellect who possesses the trait to articulate multifaceted ideas, why not present yourself as an authentic communicator with a personality who has the unique ability to humanize information so it can be understood.

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