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TECHNICALLY SPEAKING

Lose the Buzzwords, Make It Simple and Wow Your Audience

By Suzanne Bates

So many executives and professionals are "shooting themselves in the foot" by using too much jargon. Here are a few common situations:

- You work in a technical area of a business, and the CEO or senior leadership doesn't understand a problem you're trying to fix; they are frustrated. Eventually they find someone who can explain it.
- You are selling a service, such as investment management; you sit down with a prospect and start slinging around the terms from the financial world. The prospect nods as if he understands, but doesn't. You never know why you didn't make the sale.
- You're the CEO of a company trying to get investors; you put together what you believe is an impressive presentation on the capabilities of your platform. You get so buried in the neat technical stuff and jargon you forget to tell them the exciting story of why it's a great business.
- You talk to a reporter from the Wall Street Journal or another mainstream business publication and throw around jargon words to impress them. You think they must have written a lot of stories on your industry. When you see the story, and it misses the mark, you learn that it was the reporter's first day on the job there.

Why shouldn't you use buzzwords?

Buzzwords and jargon clutter communication and create damaging distance between you and other people. While it may be perfectly clear to you, if you find your audience going quiet, looking away, or not asking questions, you probably lost them.

Most people try hard to listen, even when a speaker is technical, because they want to appear as if they are intelligent, and can follow you. Even if they get the gist of what you are saying, you take a risk when you don't go out of your way to simplify. The whole purpose of speaking is

to connect and find common ground. Jargon is junk when it comes to conversation, or presentation.

I always tell my clients they should talk about business in a business setting the same way they would talk about it with friends. Everyone, and I mean everyone, appreciates it when you speak in plain English. Jargon is not ear friendly. It doesn't impress people. Even if they understand the language, you make them work for it.

You may have lost sight of what is jargon in your industry; as a matter of fact, even from company to company, and division to division, jargon is risky. The same words can mean different things. Speaking to people on your team or within a very small world, jargon can be a good shortcut. But you have to be very careful about it.

People who can communicate clearly rise to the top of organizations. Why?

- They are regarded as experts in their field – because they make complicated ideas simple to understand.
- People "get" what they are talking about. They practiced the art of making the complex clear.
- They are sought out to give presentations, to lead projects, to speak to the senior leadership team or the board, to give media interviews, and more.
- They become stars in their industries because they know how to get people to focus through simple language.
- When you hear them explain something difficult, you think "What a genius!"

What are the alternatives to jargon?

I always tell my clients to imagine they are explaining what they do to their spouse or best friend. If you can't explain it to them, keep trying. I'm not suggesting that you over simplify; that's a mistake. Losing the jargon doesn't mean you have to eliminate the subtlety or nuance of the topic.

Mario Cuomo once said you shouldn't get up to speak until you can explain it to an eight year old, and that's right.

Failing to learn this simple technique can hurt your career, in a big way. Promotions, business opportunities, everything good that comes to you in business comes when you make a real connection with people, and language is the key.