

[the key to communication] managerial



language

Language is the currency of communication. Words, and the way we use them, are essential to how we convey information, emotion and shades of meaning. But language is in perpetual evolution, changing and shifting to meet the demands of everyday life and societal trends. **Ann-Maree Moodie** reports.

There was once a time when "sick" only meant to be ill. Later it became a synonym for "disgusting". Today, to be "sick as" is the equivalent of being "cool", a term popular in the Flower Power days of the 1960s and 1970s, and recently enjoying resurgence.

Another example is the word "gay" which is now the synonym for "homosexual" rather than its previous meaning of "joyful".

Language often creates subgroups of words and phrases particular to a group of people. Children talk in words designed to keep secrets from their parents. Lovers have their own language of endearment. On a larger scale, the professions – law, accounting and medicine – and industries, such as information technology, have their own collection of exclusive terms.

These subgroups of words are called jargon, which is a word with two meanings. First it describes the language of a profession or trade, a ritualised language which legitimises the group's existence and gives it power. The second meaning is that it is the language of idiots, unintelligible, debased, barbarous.

Managerial language is the language of corporate life, and ideally it should be used to influence and persuade. Clear communication is an essential skill for a manager who must use it to fulfil the tasks

of supervising and directing subordinates. More often, however, managerial language is little more than base rhetoric; simply jargon.

This is the argument put by Don Watson, who believes that the profession of management is the worst offender of the use of jargon, and that its coercive nature is so widespread that it is killing language, and destroying its power and meaning.

In his book, *Death Sentence: The Decay of Public Language*, Watson highlights words and phrases which are rampant in managerial life, and which are so over-used that they have lost their impact. Favourites include: "empower", "commitment", "enhance", "key", "prioritise", "outcome", "going forwards", "input", "point-in-time" and "scenario".

"It's an 'assembly-line' language; it's a language to stop you thinking," Watson told Margaret Throsby on ABC Classic FM late last year.

"In the writing of it, it affects everything that comes naturally to writing like rhythm, vocabulary, construction and shape. It's language deliberately without any possibility of meaning, emotion or humour.

"You can't say you love someone in this language; you can't say you hate them. You can't do anything with it. You can't sing a song in it."

Watson argues that the loss of respect for the proper use of language has given implicit permission to invent words and to bastardise language generally. Sporting commentators and football coaches are the worst offenders.

"When the captain of a football team comes from the ground and is asked why his side won that night he will very likely say 'because we played 'accountable football'," Watson told Throsby. "Or his coach may say, 'I liked the way they played, they 'risk-taked' all night'. Or he may say, 'we just want to 'continuously improve' 'going forwards'.

"It's true that we shouldn't get obsessive >>

key points

- Managerial language is the language of corporate life, and ideally it should be used to influence and persuade.
- Clear communication is an essential skill for a manager who must use it to fulfil the tasks of supervising and directing subordinates.
- Management is the worst offender of the use of jargon, and its coercive nature is so widespread that it is killing language, and destroying its power and meaning.

Beware the cliché and excessive jargon. Over-used or tired, fuzzy words have little impact on an audience and guarantee poor communication. If your message is not getting through, look at expressing your views in clear, simple English.

» or precious about it but on the other hand, this is dead language."

At the Macquarie Graduate School of Management in Sydney, where I teach Organisational Behaviour, I tested Watson's argument, (some might say courageously and others foolishly), with a new crop of Master of Business Administration students, all of whom work as managers and who use this language daily.

Within 15 minutes, the class has contributed 80 words and phrases which

management jargon

Work your way through this list of business jargon and then try and cut them out of your memos and reports. These words have lost their power and now mean nothing except for entertainment during the playing of *Buzzwords Bingo* during one of those interminable meetings.

Synergy, take that offline, strategic fit, at the end of the day, gap analysis, best practice, the bottom line, core business, lessons learnt, touch base, revisit, game plan, bandwidth, hardball, out of the loop, go the extra mile, benchmark, the big picture, value-added, movers and shakers, ball park, proactive - not reactive, win-win situation, think outside the box, fast track, result-driven, empower employees, no blame, stretch the envelope.



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they commonly used. They included: "continuous improvement", "reinvigorate", "state-of-the-art", "acceptable losses" and "broad brush".

One student argued that it was essential to use managerial language because it was the currency of the profession. Without it, it is impossible to be admitted, or to maintain membership of, the group. But another student said he regularly left meetings not understanding what has been decided because of the overuse of these terms.

Losing consciousness

Is it true, in the words of George Orwell, that this language is "anaesthetic", that it cannot be spoken or written without the audience losing some degree of consciousness?

One way to test Orwell's theory is to use managerial language outside the office, such as in a domestic situation. For example, does it sound right for a husband to speak to his wife in this language?

I put this to my students: "Darling, I propose we enhance the sustainable growth of our household by reframing our strategy. We need to review our key strategies going forwards in order to better address the outcomes of our life together. The bottom line is that we need to communicate better with our children in order to incentivise them to renew their commitment to redressing their capability gaps.

"At the end of the day, we must maintain our strategy for this family to be an example of world's best practice."

Encouraged by this, my students joked that it was possible to romance in management jargon: "You sure shift my paradigm," offered one.

Rodney Marks, a comedian who has teased managers for 20 years about the language they use, says "values", "vision", "mission" and "strategy" have been constant travelling companions through his comedic career. These words are the cornerstones of good humour about management, he says, and will continue to be.

"Management jargon is a subset for the need for people to make particular relationships special and as such, there's nothing sinister about management language. It's just when things become so clichéd and so empty of meaning that there's a problem, but that's the same in every part of life."

A good test of whether managerial language is vacuous is to determine whether its opposite is true. A company in Sydney

advertises that it's committed to "excellence without compromise", implying excellence can be achieved with compromise.

The term, "going forwards", is another example of managerial jargon which should be debunked. Former NAB CEO Frank Cicutto recently used this term liberally in a speech he made to an Australian Institute of Company Directors' lunch. The topic of his presentation was his plans for the NAB over the ensuing five years. Imagine if he had said instead: "The National is committed to increasing shareholder value going backwards."?

The word "strategic" is an ideal example of management jargon that is used to convey the impression that a management task is important or significant. This is especially the case when it is coupled with words like "intent", "imperative" and "planning". These pairings are managerial pleonasm, or redundancies. To be "strategic" is to be "goal-directed" and surely this is the purpose of planning?

It is unfortunate that Watson does not develop his argument further in his book with a chapter that explains the illogical and illiterate nature of management jargon. Ockham's Razor, which argues against multiplying words or concepts unnecessarily, would be one tool. The 18th Century British Empirist David Hume, and his analysis of the logic of language, would also be useful here.

But for now, it seems, the Emperor will remain naked because no-one has the courage to say he's not wearing any clothes.

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further reading

- » *Fowler's Modern English Usage*
- » *Moral Hazard*, Kate Jennings, Picador, 2003
- » *Politics and the English Language*, George Orwell, The Penguin Essays of George Orwell, London, Penguin, 1984
- » *Roget's Thesaurus*
- » *The Elements of Style*, Third Edition, W Strunk and EB White, MacMillan, New York, 1979
- » *Death Sentence: The Decay of Public Language*, Don Watson, Knopf, 2003