

Why Do We Talk Like This?

By Dr. Stephen A. Laser

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Key Points:

- Buzzwords and jargon are prevalent in business and industry
- Many buzzwords have their origin in activities with clear-cut winners and losers (sports, combat and war)
- Use of jargon and business-speak decreases the credibility of the speaker/writer
- Jargon and buzzwords confuse the listener/reader
- Success is predicated by execution and can be obscured by jargon

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Recently, the bright and energetic head of a successful organization asked our firm to perform an assessment on a prospective new hire, and in doing so, identify a “*thought-leader*.” Immediately, I had visions of such job candidates having been awarded a special Boy Scout merit badge with a small cerebellum on it in recognition of being a “*thought-leader*.”

On another occasion, I had a client ask our firm to identify special issues for a new hire that would be relevant to his “*on-boarding*.” As a kid I remember water skiing behind speedboats that either had “in-boards” or “out-boards” (the difference was pretty significant in terms of the size of the wake), but the notion of “*on-boarding*” escapes me.

We have several client organizations who have asked us to help them select “*Black Belts*.” What happens if these candidates receive an unfavorable evaluation from us? Will they Karate chop my desk in half and throw me and my furniture out the window of the 34th floor of our office building? While I initially thought of these individuals as being deployed to intimidate their company’s customers into buying more products and services, I was reassured to learn that they were variants of in-house consultants advising management on issues pertaining to quality.

My personal favorite is the term “*coach*.” At present, there are 100-fold more coaches in business than in the NCAA, the NBA, and the NFL combined! A couple of years ago I ran into an old colleague of mine on the street who told me he was “*coaching*” an executive at one of his client organizations. I immediately thought of him wearing a baseball cap and whistle and ordering the assigned executive to drop for 50 push-ups, or even worse, to run laps around the company’s corporate headquarters for saying the wrong thing at a meeting or making a mistake and failing to turn in an assignment on time.

Why do we talk like this? What’s wrong with simply seeking to hire somebody smart with lots of good ideas? What about asking what kind of orientation and training a new hire requires to learn the business more quickly? What about selecting employees who suggest ways to make work simpler or more efficient? How about having a trusted advisor? Do we have to dress up our language in this manner?

On the surface, terms like “*thought-leader*,” “*on-boarding*,” “*Black Belts*,” and “*coaches*” are classic examples of putting old wine in new bottles, but there is probably more to it than that. For example, many fields have gotten face lifts over the years. Purchasing is now part of the modern supply chain; of course, human

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resources has replaced personnel and labor relations; and data processing has morphed into IT. Furthermore, buzzwords or jargon have always existed in one form or another, while fads are endemic to business and industry.

To be sure, many of the terms commonly used in business today originate from the world of sports (e.g., “coach”) or from the world of combat and war, to include the martial arts (e.g., “Black Belt”). Both arenas offer clear-cut winners and losers, and in an attempt to identify with the former group, while placing competitors in the latter position, employees can be “inspired” or “mobilized” to perform at their best. In addition, the world of sports is filled with cheering and excitement, while the world of combat is gripping and dramatic.

What seems disconcerting, however, is that by communicating in such terms, there is an air of pretentiousness or self-importance that the speaker wishes to convey to other people. Typically, such needs for self-enhancement underlie a need to be seen as influential and consequential in a world that may devalue the speaker’s profession, and perhaps, his or her significance to the organization. Where straight-talk is preferred, obfuscation prevails. This, then, adversely impacts the credibility of the person who employs such terms and in certain instances leads to a chuckle or two as listeners try to cut through the jargon to get to the true meaning and implication of the speaker’s words.

Our sense is that when words and terms get all dressed up in fancy or artificial language, they lose their impact to be persuasive – which is the exact opposite of the effect the speaker is hoping to elicit from his or her audience. This leads to a vicious cycle of less credibility and lowered impact leading to more manufactured and euphemistic words and terminology, which in turn, can cause individuals to seek to elevate their esteem and that of their function in the organization.

Finally, we all want to “*add-value*” (another ubiquitous buzzword) to our companies as well as to our customers and clients. But isn’t that why we got hired in the first place? Isn’t adding value part of the job description, regardless? This reminds me of a painful memory from my early days in consulting. During that time I was working with a large, suburban municipality to help reduce absenteeism on Fridays and Mondays amongst their public works crews, which were comprised largely of high school and college students looking to earn extra money during summer break. Naturally, with Wisconsin and the beaches beckoning, taking a long weekend was nothing out of the ordinary for them – except that it delayed critical road and sewer projects that needed completion during the warmer weather. To address the problem, the Director of Finance and I devised a plan to offer an incentive to employees who showed up for work on Fridays and Mondays, and additionally, we gave a bonus to any work crew that had perfect attendance for the month. Brilliant idea, if I do say so myself. However, when the plan was presented to the village’s Board of Trustees, one of their esteemed members was livid. She screamed, “Dr. Laser, why should we reward people for simply doing their jobs? Did you get that Ph.D. of yours out of a cereal box?” (She must

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Upcoming Topics:

- Do People Deny Who They Are and Tell You Who They Are Not?
- How Do you Manage Your Time in a 24/7 World of Work?
- Staying Connected: Maximizing Efficiency or Distraction?
- What Are the Code Words of Interviewing?
- Who Is Your Least Preferred Coworker?
- Body Language: A Valuable Tool or Pop Psychology?
- Why Do People Really Get Hired?
- Do Job Coaches Make a Difference?
- The Three C's: Do You Know What They Mean?

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have thought I was a graduate of the Kellogg School.) Her point, however painful in its public delivery, was well-taken. Moreover, “*adding value*” is just part of doing your job. Trying to embellish our services to our organizations with such a term only provides the opportunity to lower our impact and credibility.

In today’s world (and probably in times past as well), the keys to effectiveness are very basic, yet hard to translate into success. In essence, all success is predicated on execution. Finding the keys to execution, however, is the trick that each and every enterprise has to uncover. For each organization, things work a little differently due to the uniqueness of the endeavor. When we complicate our language with terminology and business-speak designed to make us sound more important, we only obscure and impede our ability to address the critical issues facing the organization, and in our increasing complex global economy that is a burden that best be avoided.

In closing, I apologize ahead of time for offending any of our readers who regularly resort to such phrases and terms. Nevertheless, my feelings haven’t changed on how these words sound and what impact they ultimately have on listeners. As with our first issue on entrepreneurship, we heard a lot of feedback from our readers. I invite a similar response with this issue. In fact, if you have a favorite term or two, one that you would like to share with us, we will post them on our website at www.laserassociates.net. We would also invite your thoughts on why we talk like this. In fact, this might be an occasion to recognize a “thought-leader” or two amongst our readership!