Is What I Think I Said What You Thought You Heard?

By

John A. Lanier, DSL

Introduction

The party game, Telephone, is a classically jovial exercise. The rules are simple. A messenger whispers a communication into the ear of an initial respondent sans repetition or clarification. The recipient relays that message in similar fashion along the line of participants—the more the better. The last recipient announces to all the message they received. The hilarity comes in the variation that proliferated across the communication channel. Indeed, the original message typically bears little resemblance to the announced message at the end of the chain. Multisyllabic and/or archaically used words complicate transmission. Moreover, ambient noise and libation exacerbate the message metamorphosis. Analogously, messaging inside professional environments suffers similar mutation. Accordingly, we are left with the point of this quarterly installment: Is what I think I said what you thought you heard?

"Telephone" in the Workplace

Two common examples emphasize the potential miscues in workplace communication. One of M3's staple deliverables is new leader assimilation. Assimilation is complementary to onboarding, but different. The focus is primarily on C-suite new hires in portfolio companies. Absent deliberately proactive enablement, acculturation of a C-level new hire can take upwards of 18 months. In private equity, a quarter can be an

eternity. A manifestation of eschewing assimilation is the possibility of the C-level new hire defaulting to the culture from which they came. Indeed, this can induce dysfunction.

Another M3 staple is acquisition integration. Processes are more easily integrated than cultures. Indeed, disparate cultures remain the primary reason acquisitions fail to meet financial expectations. Cultural integration relies on key word clarity.

What do these examples have in common? George Bernard Shaw insightfully observed that Great Britain and America "are two nations divided by a common language." Indeed,

Contextually ambiguous words undermine effective communication

I grew up thinking shag was a type of carpet. In college, it was a type of dance, perhaps with origins traceable to Carolina Beach music alluded to by author Pat Conroy in a book of similar name. Shagging lessons were necessary to be socially adept in the wake of *Saturday Night Fever*. John Travolta choreography was out of our reach, but a cast extra on the *Happy Days* set was possible.

Language has evolved with civilization. Illiteracy predominated medieval times. A peasant's vocabulary was paltry. Gutenberg's printing press was a great enabler to educational evolution. According to the Royal Shakespeare Company, the Bard of Avon is credited with 1700 word "inventions" to fit his iambic pentameter masterpieces. *Reader's Digest* estimates one thousand new words appear each year. *Webster's Third New International Dictionary, Unabridged* brandishes over 472 thousand words.

The juxtaposition of the U.S. and England is deliberate. In terms of western cultures, Americans and British are highly aligned. Even so, the profile we share is only about a tenth of world population. If there is that much disparity among friends, how much more so the possibility between adversaries. For a quick visual corroboration of this point, check out Geerte Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions Theory consisting of six descriptors: power distance, individualism, masculinity, uncertainty avoidance, long term orientation, and indulgence. This URL will enable you to dynamically make graphical comparisons: https://www.hofstede-insights.com/product/compare-countries/.

This is a hint: generic terms may not bear similar contextual definitions. My first professional encounter with this phenomenon occurred over thirty years ago. My employer ballooned in size after a single acquisition. I was a backbench observer in a senior leadership meeting between the two organizations. Weighty decisions were being made. As the dialogue wore on, I thought I detected disconnection in messaging rooted in common industry terms. I had the temerity to raise the issue ever so delicately which resulted in elevating a legitimate issue (and averting a train wreck).

I was onto something that stuck with me. Accordingly, I capture a glossary of terms in both the assimilation and integration scenarios. A litmus test for validation of this important point is legal contracts. The better ones have a section that defines terms as they will be used in the body of the document.

Maligned Manifestations

Other red flags occur. Have you ever been in a meeting when someone in power imparts something tantamount to "I think we are saying the same thing" or "we may not be as far apart as we may think?" As Lee Corso of GameDay at ESPN would say, "Not so fast my friend." In my experience the odds are about 50-50 whether this is a controlling move or a sincere summation to make progress. However, if the parties are not actually aligned, then the false foundation upon which the parties desire to advance may eventually crumble.

> *Cognitive dissonance is paradoxically friend and foe*

Why should one be suspicious? Cognitive dissonance. Our personal algorithms are designed to filter a daily dose of overwhelming input. Accordingly, we tend to latch onto affirming content and discard conflicting content. Indeed, both affirmation and contradiction may be false signals. To wit, we hear what we want to hear to preserve psychological homeostasis—and conversely disregard what we do not want to hear. Presto, we are aligned. Maybe not.

These issues are not limited to verbal communications. The Eagles wrote a song called "Your Lying Eyes." How many times have we read something that was not there—of misread something that was? Cognitive dissonance strikes again. An easy confirmation of this is optical illusions.

Another favorite is punctuation. There is a world of difference between the message "let's eat, Grandpa," and "let's eat Grandpa." One is an invitation to eat; the other is an invitation to be cannibalistic. Hannibal Lecter comes to mind for the latter.

Mediators to assure clarity of understanding is a hedge against this misstep. Professional arbitrators are trained to reconcile variation toward a sustainable compromise. An intracompany setting may be the leader designating a rotating devil's advocate to ask probing questions to assure that the descriptions and comprehension of messages jibe. The rotating assignments double as management training in proactive listening skills.

Anger and Rationality are Strangers

Something interesting happens when we become angry or distressed. In extreme cases, our fight or flight mechanism kicks in. When that happens, Daniel Goleman explained that our brain's amygdala's emotional response "hijacks" our neocortex's rational capabilities.

In less extreme cases, we may be tempted to zip off a tart email. This is not wise for many reasons. First, email may be a lousy way to communicate important messages—especially for lengthy and/or complex missives. Why? It is devoid of many things relevant to effective communication, including body language, intonation, and inflexion. Fortunately, virtual meeting tools provide an inexpensive and practical communication medium.

Second, an email is an eternal marker—for good or evil. If you doubt this, run for public office. If you have done anything stupid—ever—the corroborating evidence will make its way to the public domain. Trying to cover your tracks may make one look even worse. In substantiation of this point, consider how many press accounts produce a picture of a social media post deleted by its author.

Despite the contraindications for an email, there is some cathartic merit to *drafting* an email to purge one's system of interpersonal toxins. However, these should not be sent. At a minimum, a 24-hour rule should apply to read it after cooling off to make sure it is

Duress can deceive one to adopt inadvisable communications tactics

not something that causes irreparable fracture to decorum. Another safety mechanism is a confidante. When in doubt ask a trusted party to review a draft for appropriateness. My wife of over 40 years does this for me. She is an indispensable judge of appropriateness. For example, she proofs all my papers and articles (including these quarterly installments).

Raise Your Hand If You Hate Meetings

Meetings often seem to interfere with doing your job. However, this assumption is problematic. Meetings are supposed to make it easier to do your job. How, then, did a useful tool become such a pariah? The answer is simpler than may appear. Since only one in 10 managers is trained in how to be a manager, supervisors may have been placed in charge without necessarily knowing how to use productivity tools.

Meetings should rarely be long. They should have tight agendas. Agendas and content should be distributed ahead of time to enable preparation. Attendees should come prepared. Punctuality should be non-negotiable. The leader should assure compliance with the agenda. Rarely should scope creep be indulged. Status of an initiative affecting the attendees should follow a stoplight principle: (i) green is on schedule and the

handout should be sufficient corroboration, (ii) red is off track and any commentary and questions should be focused on catching up, and (iii) yellow is communicating issues that should not catch anyone off guard if/when they happen.

Is this unrealistically idealistic? Nope. Agile scrum updates, standup team line shift debriefs, and 30 second time-outs in a basketball game affirm that it can be done and is effective. Thus, a rhetorical question is posed: Is the real resistance that the leader does not want to invest the time and effort to make meetings productive and brief? If so, the irony may be that the leader spends more time cleaning up a mess of their own making than preventing it. Ouch! A Pogo comic strip classic comes to mind: "We have met the enemy and they are us."

Error-Proofing Complex Communications

My spouse taught me another priceless communication tactic. I was initially puzzled by something she routinely did until I asked why she did it. Afterward, I became proselytized by the appropriateness. When I would ask for help on something complicated, she would invariably parrot back her understanding of what I was asking her to do. The outcomes were as follows: (i) the intended and understood messages matched, (ii) I had been unclear, or (ii) she misunderstood my request. Author Jacko Willink imparts an analogous technique among Navy Seals in a recent installation, *Leadership Strategy and Tactics: Field Manual*.

Ask a confidante to proofread all sensitive communication drafts

Where did my wife learn this technique? One of her career milestones was in a hospital operating room. I can honestly report that this technique between us has prevented errors 100 percent of the time. My subsequent process improvement work exposed me to confirming information multiple times before a surgical procedure. This technique seems to borrow from the Six Sigma Five Whys for identifying root cause.

On one personal occasion, I greatly appreciated this technique. Just after some pre-anesthesia medication had been administered and I lay on a gurney awaiting transport to the operating room, a nurse appeared and picked up my chart. The last words I heard were, "I see you are here for . . ." No, that was not the surgery I was there to receive. However, as I opened my mouth to protest, the next thing I recall was regaining consciousness in post-op. My first conscious action was self-examination to make sure I still had the right parts.

The most novel example I have ever encountered for clear communication entailed international business. The two partners were in different countries. Each communicated in the other's native tongue. Consequently, idioms and ambiguity were defused. Their business model was rooted in asset turnover to make satisfactory return on equity on their low margin business. Mistakes were extremely expensive. Their brand of innovative creativity was clever error-proofing.

Whose Problem is Clear Communication?

One of Stephen Covey's *7 Habits of Highly Effective People* admonishes us first understand others before asking them to understand us. Organizational hierarchy and bureaucracy can ruin this ability. A favorite management technique to combat this is skip-level meetings.

The communications received by the C-suite is commonly filtered to manage the message. Good data may be missing in memos. In smaller companies with poor information systems, the managed messaging may be subjective and biased.

Skip-level is just what it sounds like. The senior boss goes to the line periodically, thus bypassing the midlevel supervisors to get feedback from those closest to the action. Atop the obvious benefits, this governance technique tends to weed out some of the editorializing by the middle. Its tactics differ from management by walking around. The

Adopt methods to circumvent bureaucratic message filtering

objective is to engage the source and context of operational information with an appropriately structured question. Reciprocity is also encouraged. The senior executive avails themself to probing questions from the line. Indeed, this is reverse skip level for the employees. The dynamic fosters both governance and culture. A corollary to this is the town hall, but people may be less comfortable posing a question amid an audience that includes their immediate supervisor than with "the" boss at the five-axis CNC machine they are operating which includes enough ambient noise to firewall prying ears.

The wisdom of this technique is corroborated by derivative technique. I learned early in my process improvement work to adopt a simple rule in project teams: no bosses. Why? Bosses are great project sponsors. However, when it comes to process improvement, they often inject bias in the form of already knowing the "right" solution which may not be the case. Besides, if the boss knows the granularly detail commensurate with line personnel, then he/she are probably not doing their day job.

Communication is not a one and done. The pros tell us that it is impossible to overcommunicate, especially in times of rapid change. On a personal note, I have often described an aspect of change in meetings when no sooner than I end my sentence does a hand in the group spring upward to ask a question that I just answered. What does this mean? It means the person's cognitive dissonance algorithm just hit a snag. The person is trying to confirm a WIIFM (what's in it for me). Until they grasp their WIIFM, all change is tantamount to something bad.

Conclusion

Effective communication combines both science and art. The science corroborates the message with data that the recipient of the message may challenge for its robustness. Good messaging also follows the newspaper article format we were taught in grade school as would be cub reporters: who, what, when, where, why, and how.

The art entails individual style. To my own satisfaction (admittedly biased), I like some messages to be entertaining to get past the cognitive bias firewall. Will Rogers is my favorite historical figure for accentuating the science with art. In a nod to this homespun philosopher, this quarterly installment will close with a snippet of his genius: "it isn't what we know that gets us into trouble; it's what we know that [isn't] so!"

****

Middle Market Methods™

Our firm offers a value-creation toolbox of growth, productivity, and cultural solutions to portfolio companies of private equity firms. The premise is that best practice adoption correlates with a smoother investment hold period, resulting in higher exit multiples. Additionally, deal team time is liberated from operational surprises to invest in new transactions.