



What you heard may not be what I said

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Language enables us to express sublime thinking and deep passion. More easily language can trip us into silly if not embarrassing moments. Like the woman in Moscow, Russia, who was stopped for a traffic violation. In her fractured attempt at Russian, she tried to explain that she was on her way to get her driver's license. What the Moscow police officer heard was that she urgently needed a restroom! Then there is the American man who having returned from a visit to the land of his ancestors, expressed frustration that he couldn't understand the local people because they were talking some "foreign language."

When traveling to another country you need a passport, and in most cases a strategy for dealing with language differences. You may squeak by as a tourist with some basic conversational expressions and vocabulary. But if your trip involves extensive interactions having to do with business, research, or education, you most likely would need an interpreter.

For most people in the workplace, the language challenges may be just down the hall. You don't need a passport to step into another department in your own organization, or to need effective communication with people in other organizations, disciplines, or even other regions of the country. The challenge is this: Ease of access does not necessarily correlate with effective communication. So, how do you learn the terrain and language of the people with whom you come in contact who may have different expressions, jargon, and ways of thinking?

Everyday in my practice I see first hand the consequences of miscommunication and what I call fly-bys. A fly-by is when one person says one thing and the person listening interprets what you said differently. Having worked with companies of all levels of sophistication, I have found three things that are essential to avoiding miscommunication and sabotaged business results.

Recognize that all words don't mean the same things to all people.

When I was twelve years old my father would come into my bedroom and say "clean your room." I didn't like cleaning my room, so I would try pleading, cajoling, and bargaining my way into avoiding the task. As always, dad won. I learned early on, however, that what "clean your room" meant to me and



what it meant to my father were totally different – and I could exploit the differences.

To me cleaning my room meant picking up the dirty dishes and putting them in the kitchen sink; picking up my dirty clothes and putting them in the laundry hamper; making my bed and closing the closet doors. My father agreed with that definition and would look at my room and said “good job.”

My mother, on the other hand, would walk into my room and question me as to why she had loads of dirty dishes and clothes to clean. And I would say confidently that I had done exactly as dad requested and that if she didn’t believe me to go and talk with dad. Needless to say, mom had a very different definition of what “clean your room” meant.

In the workplace, using words and having them mean one thing to one person and something different to someone else is both dangerous and costly. **For example**, in 1999, NASA lost a \$125 million Mars orbiter because one engineering team used metric units while another used English units for a key spacecraft operation. This fly-by failed to transfer crucial information between the Mars Climate Orbiter spacecraft team at Lockheed Martin in Colorado and the mission navigation team in California. "Our inability to recognize and correct this simple error has had major implications," said JPL Director Edward Stone. That’s an understatement!

So, what should you do? Stop and take time to ask one clarifying question whenever you’re working with someone. For example: “John, you said you would handle this part of the project. Can we take a couple of minutes to get clear as to what “handle this part of the project” means to you? Getting clear about what words mean to one another saves time and frustration. It could have also saved a \$125 million Mars orbiter.

Listening to understand versus listening to respond

All of us are good listeners. It’s just that we’re listening to the wrong person. There are two types of listening I want to address: listening to respond and listening to understand. The one I see most often in the workplace and the one that is a death knell for organizational performance is listening to respond.



Most people don't listen to the person talking – they are listening to their own internal dialogue about what the other person is saying. They are *interpreting* the words and meaning through the filter of their own past experiences. When we do this we are no longer listening but rather re-experiencing our past with all of the corresponding emotions. We're listening to ourselves and consequently we've made ourselves the most important person in the conversation.

In my team development work I interview direct reports of a team leader to understand as fully as possible what it's like to work for that leader. The goal is to live in their shoes and see the world from their perspective. Consistently, the executive who has the highest levels of trust and respect on their team listens to understand team members and not solely to respond.

There is another strong positive result from listening to understand. A genuine curiosity comes into play – curiosity about the other person's views and a desire to fully understanding not only the words they're using, but the deeper context or meaning. Listening to understand forces us to suspend judgment and listen carefully not only to the words being used, but also to the context, emotions, and inflection. This gives us the whole picture and is a superb tool for leaders to understand all aspects of team performance.

Not listening cost George Bush the 1992 Presidential election. In 1992, during a town hall debate with Ross Perot and Bill Clinton, George Bush was asked the question: *How has the national debt affected your life and, and if it hasn't, how can you honestly find a cure for the economic problems of the common people if you have no experience with what's ailing them.*"

He tried four times to answer the question, but much to his chagrin, the person asking the question still had the microphone and corrected him twice as to what her question was.

Bill Clinton, on the other hand, listened to understand and clearly and persuasively answered the question both from an emotional as well as from an intellectual perspective. The very next morning Bush's poll numbers let his campaign know that this town hall meeting probably cost him the election.



If you want to see the two forms of listening; one exhibited by George Bush and one by Bill Clinton, click the following link.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7ffbFvKIWqE>

Here's one suggestion for learning how to be a good listener. Adopt an archeologist's perspective. Recognize that every person you interact with does what they do for a reason based on the sum total of their life experiences. You don't yet know what their reasons. So, suspend judgment and scratch away at the surface of the issue and learn as much as you can about "why" the person does what they do; **what their words mean to them.** You don't have to do it the same way; you simply have to understand the issue from their perspective.

Behavior speaks louder words

Everyday the words you use and the behavior you exhibit make an impression on people. The question is whether the impression you give is positive or negative. If it's a positive impression you positively influence those you work with and in turn you contribute to the achievement of organizational goals and objectives. If you give a negative impression those with whom you are working will be less receptive to your ideas or suggestions. Your efforts and your performance will be compromised.

For those in management and leadership roles the implications are significant. To be seen as credible, your *intent* **must** equal your *impact*. That is non-negotiable! When your intent equals your impact you're seen as credible and the level of trust and respect people have toward you goes up. When your intent doesn't equal your impact the opposite is true – people doubt you. Trust and respect are in jeopardy. In thirty years of experience I've never met a manager or leader who achieved any significant long term result who wasn't viewed as credible by those they were leading.

So, what can you do? Be impeccable with your word - this means telling the truth; first to yourself and then to those you work with. Telling yourself the truth requires that you to take an honest look at your strengths and blind spots. Then capitalize on your strengths and minimize your weaknesses. Telling the truth to others requires a deep humility of what you've learned and how you plan on addressing both...for the benefit of those you work with and for yourself.



Jean Giraudoux, the French diplomat and novelist once said *“The secret of success is sincerity. Once you can fake that you've got it made.* Kenneth Lay, Bernie Madoff, Eliot Spitzer, and Mark Sanford believed in what Jean said, but thank goodness there are brave souls like you who recognize that you can't fake sincerity nor can you fake being impeccable with your word.

Have you heard what I said?

Hugh Blane is President of Claris Consulting. He is a nationally recognized business strategist hired to help organizations solve challenging business issues, strengthen personal and professional relationships, and execute on strategic initiatives with greater effectiveness. A subject-matter expert in leadership, team performance, and influence, Hugh Blane is a senior-level consultant who has worked with thousands of people in a wide variety of organizations including Pepperdine and Stanford University, the University of Washington, Microsoft, Starbucks, Spacelabs Medical, KPMG and Costco.