

Am I Making Myself Clear?

By Rebecca A. Morgan
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As business becomes increasingly international, success depends on understanding additional cultures, politics, and languages. You may need to start by making it easy to understand your own.

You were in the meeting. While you admit your concentration might have wandered a bit, when reading the minutes the next day, you have to ask “Were we in the same meeting?”

Whether from a meeting, a hallway exchange, an e-mail, or an important company report, communication between two or more people often seems to create as much confusion as clarity. That can mean increases in errors, time, and cost of operations. As business becomes increasingly international, success depends on understanding additional cultures, politics, and languages. You may need to start by making it easy to understand your own.

Why the confusion? Two important reasons: (1) in a world of uncertain job security, ambiguity may feel safer than asking a “stupid” question or taking a “stupid” position, leading employees to neither offer nor seek clarification, and (2) organizations frequently replace business English with a profession- or company-specific, and often acronym-laden, imposter that has no dictionary or thesaurus. The challenge of addressing the problem can be exacerbated by failure to acknowledge internal causes of confusion. It’s much easier to blame others. It’s those lousy schools! It’s those stupid employees!

So how do you improve communications in your business? Consider these six steps:

1. Create and maintain an acronym dictionary for your company. For each commonly used acronym, state the words that the acronym represents, and also what it means. The process of forcing agreement on the dictionary definition may lead to the elimination of some acronyms, and create clarity for others.

The newly recruited engineering manager of one electronics company I know created such a dictionary out of necessity. Notably she found that out of the several hundred commonly used acronyms she heard in her first few months, she had a different (or no) understanding of almost half. For many, she couldn’t find anyone who knew what words the

acronym represented, nor could she find agreement on what the acronyms meant.

- 2. Have a copy of the dictionary available in each meeting space.** While simple English would be nice, acronyms and industry-specific terminology have become part of common communication. The key is to use those acronyms and specialized terminologies in a way that communicates clearly and consistently.
- 3. Share the acronym dictionary with key customers and suppliers.** Ask for their input. You may find that some of the acronyms you use are not standard outside your company walls or clear to your business partners. It may be time to replace their use in your own company with terminology that is accepted in the broader marketplace.

One company hired me to help them communicate with potential outside suppliers when they were evaluating a major purchase. The managers knew that much of its vocabulary was company-specific and that the chance of misunderstanding during the evaluation phase was high. Because I had experience working with the company and in the specific field the purchase would address, they believed that I could help “translate” and eliminate miscommunication. Many companies do not recognize that their vocabulary can be misleading to outside resources.

- 4. Utilize the new set of ears that new employees offer.** Ask them to take minutes at meetings. Make it SOP (Standard Operating Procedure -- the way we do things around here) to ask for clarification of terms, language, or conversation in general, during

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Contact Rebecca A. Morgan at:
Fulcrum ConsultingWorks, Inc.
voice: 216-486-9570
fax: 216-486-9922
cell: 216-210-9109
morgan@fulcrumcwi.com
www.fulcrumcwi.com
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meetings so the meeting minutes accurately reflect what was decided. The questions they ask, and the clarification they receive, can be very helpful to everyone in the room. It is important that those discussions are treated as important clarifications and not as unnecessary interruptions.

5. Utilize potentially confusing minutes, e-mails, or other communications as teaching moments.

Sure, it would be nice if every employee could read

and write clearly. But many cannot. Offer formal courses in your company, use skilled employees to teach others, and make sure your own communication skills are effective.

6. Lead by example. Speak clearly and seek clarification. Make it safe for others to do the same.

Do you know what I mean?



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fax: 216-486-9922

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morgan@fulcrumcwi.com

www.fulcrumcwi.com

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