Go Beyond Buzzwords

Make your communication count—start by fact-checking your statements and steering clear of jargon. **BY TIM TOTERHI**

It’s easy to be seduced by catchphrases—after all, they’re catchy. The trouble is, when the incorrect, fundamentally flawed, and straight-up ridiculous are blindly believed and repeated in the classroom, trainers can lose credibility with both participants and program sponsors.

In a world where actual answers are but a Web click away, it’s important to fact-check your statements and steer clear of jargon. Doing so will not only safeguard your reputation, it will help you demonstrate value. To accomplish this, we must be as thoughtful and accurate with our words as our finance colleagues are with their data.

**SLOPPY STATISTICS**

A common trainer trap is parroting unchecked figures. For example, I’m sure most of us have heard a facilitator confidently assert that “92 percent (or was that 87 percent?) of communication is non-verbal.” Either way, it’s a compelling factoid that makes for interesting conversation. However, if the statement were correct, telephones would be useless. What the research intends to show is the accuracy and believability of the non-verbal when there is incongruence between those cues and what actually is said. So if you ask a colleague, “How are you doing?” and the person responds, “Great,” “Fabulous,” or “Living the dream,” but does so with slumped shoulders, no eye contact, and a drooping head, there is a higher likelihood that the body language is telling the truth. Of course, that explanation doesn’t fit on a slide, so some would have us believe that the secret to successful interpersonal connections is a quick game of charades.

At a recent HR conference, a presenter confidently told a room full of seasoned practitioners that 70 percent of change efforts fail—as if the statement were some grand insight that explained away the shortcomings of project sponsors. The only eye-opening element of the message was that it’s still being used. Consultants have been kicking around the concept for more than two decades, and while perhaps once directionally correct, again, we miss the point. Seventy percent of change efforts don’t fail. Many change efforts are never accurately measured in the first place, so project owners have no clue as to the degree of their success—a small but important distinction as the latter is easily fixed.

My favorite is the 70-20-10 model of learning that many trainers evangelize. Countless organizations have reframed their development offerings based on a study that often is misquoted and rarely understood. Robert Eichinger and Michael Lombardo at the Center for Creative Leadership conducted the original research in the 1980s. The study, which included only 191 successful senior executives (189 men and two women in six North American-based companies), asked the question: “When you look back on your career, which ‘key events’ made a lasting change to the way you manage?” Many would have you believe the results indicated the now familiar mantra: 70 percent from on-the-job experiences, 20 percent from others, and 10 percent from formal courses.

But that’s not quite right. You see, embedded in this data were 17.4 percent of respondents who reported learning via hardships—the personal and professional trials and setbacks one accumulates over a lifetime. While no one would purposefully build such experiences into a development plan, the point about learning from one’s mistakes and life lessons should not be overlooked. Another aspect of the research that gets muddled is the gray area between categories. Many times, trainers are the catalyst for on-the-job learning, as well as the other person reported in the 20 percent category.

The most damaging portion, however, is the blanket applicability afforded to the research. Maybe what was reviewed for senior executives looking back on the whole of their careers for indications of changes to their management style is applicable to all learning (including technical content), but I doubt it.
TIRED PLATITUDES AND NEW FADS

Sometimes trainers attempt to support sloppy statistics with faulty assertions and tired sound bites. For example, when discussing change, many attempt to explain away the alleged failure rate by noting simply that most people fear change. But who are these “most people,” which changes do they fear, and is all fear created equally?

A truer statement, perhaps, is that people don’t fear change—rather, they actively resist those changes they don’t understand, fundamentally disagree with, or envision coming out the other end having lost something significant. But that analysis takes time, a commodity few of us have in abundance, so the discussion is truncated or avoided. Instead, we are told that the cycle of change and associated employee response is directly aligned to the cycle of grief and loss.

But does that stack up against real-world experience? After all, people actively seek and embrace change all their lives. Examples abound: learning to drive, going to college, starting a new job or project, getting married, having kids, changing cities, landing a promotion, etc. So are trainers saying people only fear hardship-related change? If so, that’s encouraging and more easily addressed. Clearly, the topic deserves more than a dusty number and an untested rationale.

New statements are just as damaging. Catchy titles and corporate clichés would have us all lead from the front, for example. It sounds compelling, a militaristic analogy that would place corporate generals on the front lines with their troops, bravely leading the charge against the competition. The visual might be helpful for leader egos and employee morale, but does anyone stop to ask who minds the strategy when leaders jump into the weeds?

THE JARGON TRAP

If I hear one more trainer try to manufacture a connection with business-minded program participants by discussing the big picture impact of reducing silos in an effort to enhance departmental synergy and create more bandwidth so we can better leverage our customer-focused client portfolio, I may have to take the conversation offline and empower myself to proactively leverage some psychological resources before the force-fed paradigm shift lands me in the loony bin.

There’s nothing wrong with channeling your inner Alex P. Keaton. Just make sure you have something meaningful to say. Seasoned professionals understand the importance of clarity and brevity. If you’re looking for the proverbial win-win, resist the temptation to string together buzzwords and instead focus on facilitating meaningful dialogue.

There is a difference between talk leadership and thought leadership. The first attempts to prove importance, status, and personal relevancy by verbally water-boarding participants into compliance. The latter seeks to deliver insights so compelling that attendees can’t help but see value in the experience. Sometimes trainers provide the insight, and sometimes they orchestrate the transfer via a well-placed assist. Knowing what tool to use and shifting seamlessly from consultant to coach to facilitator and back again is more valuable than any corporate speak.

MAKE IT COUNT

With classroom time under scrutiny and companies often opting for cheaper, more scalable solutions, it’s even more important for trainers to demonstrate value. Having a buzzword-free zone where trainers and participants fact-check assumptions and clarify statements can make for a more meaningful and productive experience.

For all our challenges, trainers have something most employees rarely have—an audience. It’s our responsibility to make the most of those moments. Get it right, and we become the ambassadors of change, the brokers of best practices, and the catalysts for what’s next in our organizations. That, to me, seems like a worthy pursuit.