

# BUSINESS

By Andrea Salmon

At a recent companywide meeting, the vice president of XYZ Training Corporation arrived to deliver a message designed to inspire employees about the new approach the company was taking. Hundreds of staff readied themselves. With the new line of products and services about to be unveiled, enthusiasm was high. As a manager, I thought: "This is going to be a great motivational speech for my team—what a great way to kick off the new year!"

The VP's speech commenced: "Our proactive reengineering initiative for training is going to be championed by our best-of-breed service partners, whose experiential histories foster enterprise-wide learning. With our new products and services, we are poised for competitive dynamics and the globalization that will empower a new paradigm shift in learn-

ing. Helicoptering this vision will enable XYZ Corporation to grow market share and become a major player in the training industry."

Midway through, one of my staff leaned over to me and asked, "What?"

The entire speech, as it went on, was filled with jargonese and went completely over everyone's head, including mine.

Even if we'd had a dictionary, it wouldn't have helped because definitions for that kind of corporate terminology can't be found in most references—though dozens of books have been published in an attempt to clarify the new language of business-speak. And college graduates are being told that to survive and thrive in the business world, they should become familiar with the basics of corporate

jargon. Will we see Corporate Jargon 101?

There's no doubt meaningless jargon is becoming prevalent in corporate America. It seems as if every company is trying to put its own spin on the new language. In fact, people speak the lingo even when they don't know what they're saying. Coining new phrases has become something of a trend.

People are even finding entertainment in the overflow of expressions. The *Wall Street Journal* published an article uncovering Buzzword Bingo, a surreptitious game in

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which employees tally points in meetings by tracking the jargon their bosses use—such as *value-add*, *net-net*, and *corporate alliancing*.

It's easy to default to jargon in the fast-paced business environment. There are times when one buzzword encapsulates three sentences worth of thought and can give the impression of being cutting-edge. Jargon can also be used to gain advantage by excluding or confusing other people or to mask inexperience or lack of expertise.

There is a right time and place for corporate jargon, but relying on it for day-to-day corporate communication doesn't foster real understanding among employees. The cost is more often than not

unclear messages that will have no effect and won't inspire commitment or action.

A British research firm found that two-thirds of employees don't believe company communications, and fewer than half understand their companies' mission due to the heavy use of argot. Six months ago, I conducted a communication audit at a company and the results were astonishing. Many people said they were "lost in corporate lingo" when reading the company's typical press releases.

Regardless of how elegant and powerful some corporate jargon may be, some people will find it confusing and even idiotic. So, you might want to use plain English in your next talk to the troops instead of droning on in corporate-isms.

Try to speak the same language as your audience so the meaning of your message won't be garbled. When addressing the board of directors or technicians, using jargon might be acceptable or even expected. But when speaking to a mix of people, a straightforward approach is best.

Mark Twain once praised a colleague, "I notice that you use plain, simple language, short words, and brief sentences. That is the way to write English. It is the modern way and the best way. Stick to it!" TD

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