

When The Next Cubicle is a Broadcasting Booth

Susan Pinker

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Dear Susan:

I work in a office of cubicles – two metre high walls -- so you often don't know if the person on the other side is at his desk. My neighbour insists on using his speaker phone, even though he is the only one listening and he faces the wall next to me. Thus I hear all his conversations and the replies from the caller. I'm new to this office and it seems that having a speaker phone is a privilege. Any suggestions on how to tell him to tone it down or pick up the handset?

Dilbert

Dear Dilbert:

Your office neighbour will be mortified to learn that you hear every word of his conversations with his mother. If you're new and haven't yet earned your own "blower" he's probably oblivious to your presence.

Open concept offices have a paradoxical effect—the dividers lend the illusion of privacy while broadcasting every sound and smell from within. Ostensibly designed to foster teamwork, while coincidentally keeping overhead down, these cube farms are petri dishes for interpersonal conflict. It should be no surprise that productivity is affected. Conversational noise is the top beef of office workers, 81 percent of whom report that they could get more done if the office were quieter, according to workplace productivity surveys. There is even research evidence from Gary Evans, an expert in environmental stress at Cornell University, that moderate office noise results in elevated levels of epinephrine, a hormone linked to heart disease.

Other than using your iPod to mask the blabbing, your only option is to let your neighbour know what you know. Next time there's a quiet moment ask him if he's aware that you hear it all, from his social plans to his salary negotiations. Once he knows you have information – not that you'd use it against him -- he won't object to using a handset or a headset to preserve his privacy and your sanity.

> From: "Varga, Christina" <CVarga@globeandmail.ca>
> Date: Mon, 29 Aug 2005 13:52:54 -0400
> To: Susan Pinker <susanpinker@videotron.ca>
> Subject: RE: next week's column
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> Susan,
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> I'm trying to find the other Q&A (though if you have it, I would be grateful
> if you could send it to me), but in the meantime, here are a few questions
> (loved the string of jargon - scary, almost):
>
> Dear Susan,!
>
> As a manager recently transferred to a different division, I am still
> adjusting to my new city, office and staff. One problem I have is that
> everyone seems to love jargon here. My new staff and the other managers are
> either trying too hard or I've been out of school for too long, but I
> sometimes don't understand what they're talking about. I'm beginning to think
> it's all a bunch of BS to cover up what people don't know or aren't doing.
> Should I ask people to speak and write in normal English or would this be
> rude?
> - The Newcomer!
> Dear Newcomer,!
> Ask your staff to speak plainly. It's only fair to let them know what
> irritates you right from the get-go (sorry *APOLOGIZING BECAUSE IT'S JARGON — yes, if you don't want the apology here, replace with get-go with "start", or eliminate all the apologies
> DIDN'T GET IT UNTIL NEXT SORRY, MAYBE BECAUSE IT'S NOT ENOUGH OF A JARGON
> WORD). Otherwise the next time someone dialogues about leveraging a strategic,
> multilateral model to add value with core stakeholders, you'll speak to that
> issue by baring your teeth and hissing. Your mute fury might drive roadblocks
> onto the critical path.

- > Vapid business jargon is clearly a soft target. Not just Dilbert, but hundreds
- > of lexicons lampoon the vocabulary on the web.
- > One of them, johnsmurf.com/jargon.htm, uses Homer Simpson's boss, Mr. Burns, as its corporate icon,
- > another, westegg.com/jargon/, invites anyone to rewrite an incomprehensible corporate mission
- > ~~statements-statement-~~ for a \$100 reward. The ~~best~~se lists allow anyone to add an entry,
- > just like Wikipedia, the on-line encyclopedia that's continuously updated and
- > edited by its users. *WHAT ARE THEY? See above
- > You can circulate a few jargon lists to your staff with a light request to
- > avoid ~~these~~-buzzwords (sorry *SAME PROBLEM - BUZZWORD ISN'T SO MUCH JARGON AS
- > A NOW-ACCEPTED WORD FOR JARGON) OK to take out sorry within the group. Invite them to update the
- > lists with a few of their own entries and pass them around. Self-mockery can
- > shift the culture within your team as long as it's generic and doesn't target
- > any one staff member.
- > Your colleagues are another story. Jargon works to define a group and keep
- > outsiders, well outside. As a newcomer, you want to be in the loop
- > (sorry ~~again~~- *THIS ONE WORKS).
- > Jargon can also work as a shortcut when a precise term stands for a longer
- > phrase for those in the know. A hospital announcement of Code Blue *I VAGUELY
- ~~> REMEMBER AN EMAIL YOU SENT ABOUT THIS -- THAT IT MAY ONLY BE AMERICAN? BUT,~~
- ~~> THOUGH I DIDN'T FIND A SPECIFIC EXAMPLE, CERTAIN WEBSITES MENTIONING 'CODE~~
- ~~> BLUE' IN A CANADIAN CONTEXT LED ME TO BELIEVE IT'S A CANADIAN TERM AS WELL is~~
- > one example, when a ~~medical emergency~~cardiace arrest requires specific equipment and
- > procedures of staff without alarming its visitors.

- > But I don't think business jargon works that way. It's more like Pig Latin:
- > not that hard to use, hard to understand and a bit silly.

- > Unfortunately, as you haven't been there long, you can't say much about it to
- > your peers that won't mark you as a cynic and an outsider. All you can do is
- > observe your co-workers' interactions until you know where you fit in and
- > paraphrase what you think they mean to make sure you've got it right.
- > I asked ÖHenry Mintzberg, the Cleghorn Professor of Management Studies at
- > McGill University, about his take on business jargon, given that his new book,
- > Strategy Bites Back, co-written with ÖBruce Ahlstrand and ÖJoseph Lampel,
- > ~~deploys it in some of its essays and~~ debunks it in **some of its essays others.**
- > ~~*DEPLOYING AND~~
- > ~~DEBUNKING CONFUSES ME - I WANT TO KNOW WHY HE DEPLOYS IT WHEN COMMENTS BELOW~~
- > ~~INDICATE IT SHOULDN'T BE USED. CAN WE CUT THAT LAST PART OUT?~~
- > "It should be exposed as complete nonsense," he said of buzzwords like
- > seamlessness and thinking outside the box. "These concepts are used
- > mindlessly."
- > Scribbling a diagram of a box trapped **inside** another box, he said that people who
- > use the phrase thinking outside the box are usually the last people to do it.
- > "It's not a question of stopping the vocabulary but of hiring people who can
- > think," he said.
- >
- > -----Original Message-----
- > From: Susan Pinker [mailto:susanpinker@videotron.ca]
- > Sent: Wednesday, August 24, 2005 4:20 PM
- > To: Brodie, Terry; Varga, Christina
- > Subject: next week's column
- >
- >
- > Hi Terry and Christina:
- >
- > Here's next week's column to add to the q and a left over from last week
- > (the one about the speaker phone). Together the two should add up to about

> 880 words. Hope all's well.

>

>

> Susan

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