Have we communicated?

Albert Einstein summarized the problem nicely: *"The major problem in communication is the illusion that it has occurred"*. Making a noise or sending emails is not communication, communication is a two way process to build a common understanding. Without understanding it is impossible to agree, disagree or resolve anything.

Lewis Carroll considered communication in *Through the Looking-Glass, and What Alice Found There (1872)*: "When I use a word", Humpty Dumpty said in rather a scornful tone, "it means just what I choose it to mean - nothing more and nothing less". Interestingly, Humpty Dumpty's view of communication is similar to most peoples.

The trouble is if you want to communicate with a purpose, the listener needs to understand what you have chosen the word to mean and this is not helped by the English language! A few examples to confuse anyone:

- The bandage was *wound* around the *wound*.
- The farm was used to *produce produce*.
- The dump was so full that it had to *refuse* more *refuse*.
- We must *polish* the *Polish* furniture.
- He could *lead* if he would get the *lead* out.
- When shot at, the *dove dove* into the bushes.
- I did not *object* to the *object*.
- The insurance was *invalid* for the *invalid*.
- There was a *row* among the oarsmen about how to *row*.
- They were too *close* to the door to *close* it.
- The buck *does* funny things when the *does* are present.
- A seamstress and a *sewer* fell down into a *sewer* line.
- To help with planting, the farmer taught his *sow* to *sow*.
- The *wind* was too strong to *wind* in the sail.
- After a *number* of injections my jaw got *number*.
- Upon seeing the *tear* in the painting I shed a *tear*.
- I had to *subject* the *subject* to a series of tests.

No wonder the English language is hard to learn!

Whilst any language is superficially made up of words and words have meaning, context is critical. An example is *'Since there is no time like the present, he thought it was time to present the present.'* This sentence could be rewritten *'Since there is no time like the present, he thought it was time to bestow the gift.'* What's really interesting though is most people with a good command of English within the context of the whole sentence would have little difficulty in distinguishing between:
- present = the current time
- present = bestow or give
- present = gift.

But it's not that simple! Context depends on a whole range of factors including professional background. Ask an Architect for the plans for a project and expect to see a bundle of drawings. Ask the same question of a PMP qualified project manger and expect to see a bundle of documents including the schedule, budget and scope. Same word different meaning based on the context the listener is working within. Then there are the new languages such as industry jargon and the shorthand used in many SMS and twitter messages which can be almost impenetrable to outsiders.

Dealing with anomalies within one's native language is learned from childhood or the jargon used of many years within your profession is one thing. Correctly interpreting anomalies in another language, or understanding someone else's jargon is far more difficult. You need time and a two way dialogue to ensure correct understanding. **No understanding means no communication, or worse, miscommunication!**

Recognising breakdowns in understanding in face to face conversation is fairly easy; however, the arrival of emails, SMS and virtual teams has transformed the communication landscape. A confused look cannot be seen through the medium of SMS.

In a virtual team more than 90% of the communication is likely to be based on the words in emails and texts. The rules of effective communication are different and the degree of acceptance of these 'new rules' is likely to be age based. Generally, the younger the person, the more readily they accept text based asynchronous communications as normal and useful.

Whereas most people in their 50s and 60s really need to see someone they are dealing with at least once or twice to build rapport and open effective communications.

What does this mean for a project manger developing a communication plan today? The short answer is I don't know. Effective project communication is critically important, but I would suggest relying on any set of protocols that worked in the past without a careful assessment of their current effectiveness is likely to be counterproductive.

In this new age of interconnectedness, project managers in the second decade of the 21st century will need to regularly re-evaluate what works and what needs changing if they intend to communicate effectively with all of their stakeholders. Communications will need to be crafted to meet then needs of both the sender and receiver, language will need to be standardised and simplified and care taken to ensure communication has actually occurred.

The only 'old rule' that still holds true is if the communication fails, it is the fault of the communicator for not checking to see if the message was received and understood. Everything else is evolving and changing.

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