In Praise of Ambiguity

By Jane Malik

A proper discussion about the concept of ambiguity must begin with a definition. For this purpose, I have chosen Dictionary.com Unabridged (V 1.1):

Ambiguity [am-bi-\textit{gyoo-i-tee}]

1. Doubtfulness or uncertainty of meaning or intention: \textit{to speak with ambiguity}; \textit{an ambiguity of manner}.
2. An unclear, indefinite, or equivocal word, expression, meaning, etc.

Public signage commonly presents unambiguous statements, which any sober person would likely understand:

- Yield To Oncoming Traffic
- No Spitting
- No Littering
- No Lifeguard on Duty; Swim at Your Own Risk
- No Shirt, No Shoes, No Service
- Slippery When Wet

We would not likely argue about the real meaning of these notices, resembling a voice from the Patron Saint of Good Sense. Would anyone enter a restaurant whose signs admonish “No Shirt, No Shoes, No Service” wearing no pants? Perhaps, but their intention is clear to me and (almost) everyone I know.

Corporations are legal entities endowed with ‘personal’ attributes. Among the worst of those attributes is the inability or \textit{unwillingness} to be clear. In their desire to avoid litigation one could speculate, corporations have graced us with tremendous ambiguity. Witness the following excerpts from corporate mission statements (with my comments):

- To Delight the Customer
  - (Tickling is fine!)
- To Improve Profitability by 45% in the 4th Quarter
  - (Start emptying your desk, preferably before your mid-afternoon break.)
- To Continually Improve Our Processes
  - (Just after we get our feet in the door!)
- To Do Our Best
(And as a bonus, we will recommend somebody to pick up the pieces when you throw us out.)

- To Be a Good Corporate Citizen
  - (Whatever the Hague sentences us to will be obscured observed in due time.)

The responsibility for corporate clarity may move along hierarchical structure, or it may be located in a central spot. I once worked for an operations manager who insisted that all team members constantly be on the lookout for “duplicitous data.” (And I think he meant it; those double-dealing records will eat your lunch.)

For many years I was a speech writer at an international IT corporation. During those years, I had access to the Corporatespeak Tool. Using this tool, one could pick a word or phrase from each of four columns, string them together, and create a forthright-sounding executive statement:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Introductory Phrase</th>
<th>Subject</th>
<th>Verb</th>
<th>Object</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nonetheless,</td>
<td>the primary goal of both the system, and subsystem interface</td>
<td>enhances the importance of and dependence on</td>
<td>the residual specifications.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In all probability,</td>
<td>dependent tactical communication success</td>
<td>is dependent upon and exits to define</td>
<td>all project-specific compatibilities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Be that as it may,</td>
<td>each and every independent processing component</td>
<td>recognizes and literally strives to achieve</td>
<td>the ancillary discrete configuration effort.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Similarly,</td>
<td>the specification in regard to system configuration</td>
<td>can be examined to reduce</td>
<td>structural engineering standardization errors.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In particular,</td>
<td>a specialist who is prepared with the proper principles</td>
<td>requires significant utilization and adherence to</td>
<td>the elimination of future complications.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

I didn’t use the Corporatespeak Tool, nonetheless my speeches began with words like,

“Commenting on the reorganization, Mr. Bosworth said, ‘I acknowledge everyone who has contributed to our streamlined organization and its link to enhanced profitability in the fourth quarter.’”

Mea culpa.

Those of us in IT consulting have a profoundly negative reaction to ambiguity when it appears in a contract or bonus structure. That personal finance scenario notwithstanding,
my theory is that we consultants are walking, talking thesauri who thrive in corporate ambiguity, as we are given the opportunity to address:

- Ill-defined production problems and their resultant solutions, that ultimately affect corporate goals
- Poorly defined or undefined system requirements that result in systems that may be better, but don’t do what is needed nor wanted
- Immeasurable metrics that reduce efforts to achieve Six Sigma to meaningless error counting
- Outdated processes that still ‘make sense’ to company insiders, but don’t address the changing business environment
- Corporate ‘indirectives’ that send everyone in his or her own direction

We love to poke, prod, and wrestle with this species of ambiguity. Ambiguity is the perfect Petty Tyrant in our profession, and in resolving it we find the clarity that we and our clients seek.

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