

A Common Language: Making Sense to Each Other

By Trenton Hightower

It seems like common sense: the essence of effective communication is a common language.

Babies know this. Infants worldwide all begin making the same set of sounds, but eventually form those sounds into the words they hear in the world around them. Children in the Ukraine begin to speak Russian, and most toddlers in America will begin to speak English. How else would they learn to move effectively through the world around them if not for a common language with a shared vocabulary?

Both the business world and the academic arena have been surprisingly slow to embrace this concept. A common language with a shared vocabulary in the workplace is rare indeed. Firing staff is called "letting people go," retrenchment, downsizing and reduction-in-force. At one local college, the same non-academic class is labeled non-credit, continuing education and credit-free. There is little consistency among titles and job positions across entities-- even day-to-day, core activities within an organization are rarely standardized through a common language. The result? Widespread confusion that is completely avoidable when we take the time to standardize words, terms and concepts in advance.

Let's start, however, by making the case for taking the time to develop a common language with a shared vocabulary within your department or work group. Basically, there are three great reasons:

- Identifying the exact words that will be used to identify key concepts and activities results in clearer communication. It saves time and increases productivity.
- Training new employees becomes easier, less time-consuming and more effective. Because a common language emerges from a clearly-defined mission, it assures that the most important concepts are presented to new team members first.
- Should a co-worker need to step in to complete a team member's project, a common language with a shared vocabulary makes the next steps clear.
- When communicating with clients, a common language helps make sure expectations are clear at the outset, and outstanding results are more likely.

One community college-based customized training team built a common language regarding three major areas: departmental processes, training areas, and levels of education.

Departmental Processes

Ask any team member what this group does, and the answer will always be the same:

- Consultation
- Assessment
- Training Development
- Training Beginning
- Evaluation
- Follow-up

This consistency was only possible after they took the time as a group to discuss their mission, vision and values. From these discussions emerged a common language which they all committed to using. The standardization and shared understanding of the terms and concepts saved the group both time and the frustration of miscommunications.

Areas of Service

After further discussion, the department concluded that any of the hundreds of classes they offered could be divided into what they called the Four Quadrants:

- Leadership & Supervisory
- Computer Skills
- Job Specific Skills
- Individual & Staff Development

Keeping the offerings organized among the four quadrants kept communications within the department clear and on target. Most importantly, presenting the complex array of courses available to clients using these common terms promoted better understanding.

Levels of Education

In order to meet a client's expectations, a work group has to understand what those expectations are. For example, in the customized training arena, we know that time limitations often affect the level of training that can be achieved. Developing a common language surrounding the three levels of training was an important step in mutual acceptance of a course outcome:

This work group defined the three levels of training as:

- *Awareness*
Individuals gain an awareness of a new skill, topic, idea or method.
Used for orientation, overview or reinforcement.
- *Learning & Practicing*
Structured as a workshop to enable individuals to learn and reinforce new skills
- *Mastery*
Individuals become proficient at the skill. Typically conclude with a certification or other recognition of competency.

One of the most effective measures we can take to improve communication and reduce confusion is to develop the basis of a common language. When there is broad-based consistency in vocabulary, terms and definitions, the result is better understanding, increased productivity and markedly better outcomes.