

Language is the mother of thought, not its handmaiden.
— Karl Kraus

TOWER OF BABBLE

**IF BOOSTING CORPORATE PRODUCTIVITY IS SO IMPORTANT,
MAYBE WE SHOULD START BY SAYING WHAT WE ACTUALLY MEAN**

STORY DON WATSON ILLUSTRATION ROHAN CAIN

In the space of a generation, management doctrine has turned language into a bog. Since language is the principal means by which we know and trust each other, it is a change of some consequence. For evidence of this, just watch a tape of Rupert and James Murdoch before the British parliamentary inquiry into phone hacking. Even when he seemed to be imitating a man on the cusp of senility or the most humble of God's children, Murdoch senior spoke common English. His meaning was clear to us and would have been to most English speakers since Milton. If he fibbed, at least he did it in his native tongue.

His son spoke a foggier dialect. Several times, he expressed his "deep regret" and just as often he said his company was determined to review processes whose failings were apparent from the matters he regretted. That old managerial favourite "transparency" bobbed up repeatedly, which always seems odd when it is so hard to see through to the meaning. When he said, "There are thresholds of materiality, if you will, whereby things have to move upstream ..." he might have been describing what had happened to his audience.

Management language is unique in this: the listener hears the photocopier, a passing flock of galahs, his mother calling him 40 years ago – anything but the words being spoken. Reading it has the same effect: the mind either closes down or strays in the direction of food or sex, or whether to get a nose stud.

This language is also peculiar in disguising any character or insight its speakers or writers might possess. "Speak that I may see thee," Ben Jonson said – not if thee speak management, he won't.

Of the two Murdochs, James looked much the less likely to be found poking around in your hydrangeas in the middle of the night; yet the more he spoke, the greater seemed the possibility. Observers, struggling to stay conscious through the anaesthetising jabber, could only surmise that

either he was masking guilt or unable to find words to express innocence because, as George Orwell once put it, “an accumulation of stale phrases choke[d] him like tea leaves blocking a sink”.

Orwell had a talent for seeing the contours of malevolence and stupidity prowling in the seeming ordinariness of human behaviour. He saw them in language, particularly the language of bureaucrats and ideologues. One day in June 1940, he put aside his usual preoccupations with international politics and raising hens to complain in his diary: “Most educated people simply don’t realise how little impression abstract words make on the average man.”

With the first German bombs falling on London, and the survival of civilisation in the balance, it might seem a bit precious to be whingeing about the language. But Orwell was not correcting anyone’s grammar. As he wrote a few years later, language is not a frivolous matter, nor one confined to professional writers. Language is the principal means of influence in human affairs. It has effects. The writers in this case were government officials wishing to teach citizens what to do during air raids. They were failing, Orwell said, because there was nothing concrete in their prose and therefore “nothing that will move the poorer working class or even be quite certainly intelligible”.

In the Blitz, life itself depended on language being intelligible. Elsewhere, for Orwell, much else depended on it. Civilisation, for instance. And democracy. In his novels, *1984* and *Animal Farm*, he made language what the 20th century’s totalitarians made it: an instrument for controlling minds, hiding or inverting truth, making virtues of despicable acts. (All this, yet mission statements had not been invented.) In Orwell’s view, as the world was in general worse for ideology, so it was better for its natural enemies: clarity and freshness of thought and expression, an abundance of verbs and an absence of clichés and cant. The rule applied to politicians, bureaucrats, party officials, journalists, broadcasters and stuffed shirts of all kinds – all those wielding power and possessing information.

PLAGUE ON WORDS: Today, much of the power and information has passed to private corporations and the chief executives and managers who run them. It’s a different world to Orwell’s, but he saw this plague of ours foreshadowed in the words of academics, government officials and party hacks 60 years ago: “The concrete melts into the abstract and no one seems able to think of turns of speech that are not hackneyed: prose consists less of words chosen for the sake of their meaning and more of phrases tacked together like the sections of a prefabricated hen-house.”

Through the managerial revolution – or epidemic – a relative handful have settled their doctrines on most of the population. Corporations, all levels of government, public institutions and political offices live by them; executives, civil servants and teachers; hospitals, fire brigades, universities, the arts and sport; politicians and police. Airline stewards who urge haste “to achieve an on-time departure”. (“Oh, my ears and whiskers! I shall not achieve an on-time departure!” said the White Rabbit.)

According to sociologist Frank Furedi, even the Occupy Wall Street protesters think like managers and occupy their language. Orwell offered half a dozen examples of these language offenders, including a famous professor of political science, a critic and a communist pamphleteer. Today, we don’t need to look in such confined places. We can gather a few specimens at random from the everyday world at any time (see “Shame files”, this page and facing).

Ask yourself: apart from the possibility that the writers take you for a moron, is there an atom of anything worth knowing or likely to be true in such conscientious tripe? You may as well look for inspiration in the shredder bin. It’s “Bullshit”, as Princeton philosopher Harry Frankfurt called it. Bullshit is not lies, he said, but stuff written by people who have no need for the truth and no regard for it. This much is true of management-speak, which has been concocted not to investigate reality, but in the manner of an

SHAME FILES



“We believe our customers [retailers] and ourselves should take a shared view of growing the value pool ... Drawing from our experience, we will adopt this shared partnership approach to value creation with joint business planning and enhancement of the shopper experience in off-premise channels.”

SABMiller CEO Graham Mackay, describing the “Building Execution Excellence at Retail” (BEER) initiative after the brewing company bought Foster’s

Outcomes are the benefits or other long-term changes that are sought from undertaking the project. They are achieved from the utilisation of the project’s outputs. Outcomes are linked with objectives, in that if the outcomes are achieved then the project’s objective(s) have been met.

Tasmanian Department of Premier and Cabinet, project business plan, April 2008

assembly-line, to convey certain highly circumscribed items of information. In ideal conditions, this form of communication might do an organisation some good. Very often, however, the results are grotesque. No doubt, through the managerial principles many miracles have been, as they say, achieved. Relentless examination of internal processes is bound to do some good – sometimes.

But when the Victorian Department of Treasury and Finance says it is “important we all demonstrate behaviours reflective of both the organisational aspirations of the department, and the specific work accountabilities, deliverables and outputs of which we are individually responsible”, we wonder if it made much difference.

We’re also not convinced that “negative patient outcomes” have become much rarer in a Castlemaine hospital since consultants advised its managers that, not their nurses and doctors, but their brand “set them apart”. Similarly, education doesn’t seem to gain much when schools tell parents they should “feel free to contact your child’s student learning manager” instead of their teacher. And surely as much is likely to be lost as gained if the Anglican Synod of Sydney takes its consultants’ advice to substitute a “culture of accountability” for its “culture of forgiveness”.

General Manager Performance and Talent
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Acting principal of a public school in Dee Why, Sydney

Then there is Ernst & Young ("Quality in Everything We Do") whose CEO and CEO-elect jointly reported a few years ago they had "put many new initiatives in place that are paving the way for a sustainable future [and] made considerable investments in our people initiatives. Central to this was an Accelerated Collaborative Event (ACE), which enabled a broad cross-section of our people to have input into our people approach ... [and] ... our strong stance on quality was heightened this year, with an ACE focusing on independence and integrity ... "Now there's a prefabricated hen-house.

MANAGEMENT language is used to lie and obscure, to spin and "message", to brainwash and befuddle. It can do all the things that can be done with language except describe, explain, amuse or evoke such common sensations as pleasure, pain or downheartedness. One speaking it can neither express sympathy nor attract it; find no lyric or comic possibility, no irony, fresh metaphors, whimsy, invention or sensation. Subtle distinctions are beyond its reach. Instead, often it oversimplifies and distorts. One may be able to perform certain tasks in management-speak, but one cannot think clearly or independently. The purpose is otherwise.

Though words such as "innovation", "action" and "diversity" are favourites of management, managerial language, like the effort to win "buy-in" and adherence to a set of "values" and "goals", is chloroform to independent thought or action. Most of the world's lies are now told by people who prefer to tell the truth. Management ideology co-opts them to the cause of bullshit: first by its organisational fixations and invented "values", and then by a language so depleted, stale and abstract it permits nothing but bullshit.

That famous fragment of Orwell's not only goes to the point about official language, it also offers an example every organisation might at least put in its mission statement: write in concrete terms and use concrete examples; hate cliché, love verbs; give up dot points and take up sentences; think. It also helps the cause of life and clarity if you keep to what you know and can explain, and try to know more than your professional training has taught you.



"I encourage our minds to shift to one word ... 'outcomes'. Outcomes, outcomes, outcomes. Long-term outcomes, state and federal outcomes, Labor and Liberal outcomes, for-profit and not-for-profit outcomes. Whatever does your biscuit, the key from here is outcomes."

Rob Oakeshott, Federal MP

Of course, the world is run by people who may be whizzes in their professional fields, but – paintball battles and other team-building exercises notwithstanding – lack the concrete experience in which language has its roots. They feel obliged to speak and write in professional language: that is to say, very often in abstractions understood only by a few others in the same profession, and of interest only to those few. Abstractions are sometimes useful and necessary, but if we want to be understood – and read and heard – language must be concrete. That was the point Orwell made about instructions issued in the Blitz. The same might have been said to the "professionals" who were meant to warn communities ahead of the Black Saturday bushfires. Unless language is concrete, people neither listen nor understand.

SOCIOPATHIC: Managers need not be altogether ignorant of a world that generations have called on to give their language graininess and punch. They can manage a thousand men and women. They rule the world. But they can't write a paragraph worth reading. Judging from what they say and write, and instruct others to say and write, good management demands sub-literate drones barely capable of thought. Though its speakers may not deserve the description, management language is sociopathic.

Of course, English has always been under some form of attack and has never wanted for defenders of its plain and formal beauties. Good luck to them. We live in the language and should not treat it like a flophouse. But English evolved as a hybrid and much of its strength stems from this "hybrid vigour". It readily accommodates lodgers from other languages and dialects, from the frontiers of science and technology, from the idioms of fashion and popular culture and, yes, from business. New words drift into the vocabulary and do no harm there. But management language is a threat of a different order. There is language in need of occasional correction by grammarians and Plain English puritans, and then there is this toxic, new-fangled muck: abstract and weak-minded, cut off from the provenances of English, threatening both its formal splendours and the beauty of the vernacular.

Now, business leaders might reckon they have more important things to think about. If so, they should spare us all the pretensions to "innovation", "flexibility", "communication" and "creativity". However, if such things do matter in their sphere, they should have a care for the language they use. If thinking is important to your bottom line, why use language that makes it all but impossible? Why not include in your statement of corporate social responsibility, somewhere among your values and roughly aligned with your goals, a line to say that language matters? Either that or have the decency to come clean and say: "Language is the mother of thought, so we have strangled it." **B**

Don Watson's books include Death Sentence, Watson's Dictionary of Weasel Words and Bendable Learnings.

We want to hear good examples and back. Send feedback to boss@afri.com.au