Clarity of Message: The Effective Use of Vague and Precise Language

The key task of facilitation is communication. Language both written and spoken is a way of translating ideas (internal experiences) into action (behavior). The ability to use both precise and vague language builds flexibility and creates a wide range of options and can make the most difficult communication easier.

Language is learned. As a small child, you learned to listen and to speak from the example set by parents, adults and siblings in your environment. Because the patterns of sounds held no internal meaning initially, you began by emulating them. Perhaps you were delighted that you could make the same sound you heard, or were amazed that others responded to your vocalizations. Because you didn’t know, you could learn. And, because there wasn’t a formal rigor to learning how to speak and to listen, you learned by experience. Like riding a bicycle or driving a car, it soon became second-nature. Now, as a competent adult, you generally use those second-nature skills without much conscious thought.

Because communication is so important to the effective facilitator, time spent in developing new skills rather than depending on these second-nature reactions will have real paybacks. The most difficult kinds of communications tasks will become easier. Skilled verbal exchanges, from meeting rooms to hallway conversations, can become powerful tools facilitators can use to get what the group wants.

The Power of Language

As you read these words from the page, your eyes capture patterns of white and black. The patterns form words, words you recognize, words that communicate to you. While your eyes scan this page, you find that you are absorbed in the ideas being expressed. As a consequence, you are probably not aware of the sounds around you...at least until your attention was redirected by this sentence. As you contemplate the meaning of these words, your right hand reaches out for the blue paperweight on the stack of documents at the far left corner of your desk.

While you were reading this past paragraph you probably had several different experiences, each induced by the words you read and decoded in your mind. In the first three sentences the words were vague and nonspecific. They were intended to capture your attention and assure that you, the reader, were in communication with the thoughts of the authors, even though you were separated from them by months and miles. The fourth sentence directed your attention to a specific external stimulus: The sounds you can hear. That sentence was highly specific and clear, and probably jolting or distracting, unless you happen to be sitting at your desk, and happen to have a blue

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paperweight, and happen to want to turn to some documents instead of reading this paper.

**Specificity: Developing Precise Language**

The above are examples of how a listener or reader can be affected by vague or precise language. Phrases like "patterns of white and black" and "absorbed in the ideas" are quite non-specific. They provide the opportunity for the reader/listener to define their own meanings in familiar and comfortable ways. The text described that which was necessarily true. Your eyes are reading the words from the page, for example. Then everything else was left to your imagination. This example used just enough specificity to establish some common experience so that the vague phrases became plausible or implicitly meaningful. That specificity appears in phrases like "these words" and "words you recognize."

On the other hand, phrases like "blue paperweight," "right hand" and "reaches out" are specific. There is little doubt about what those words communicate. In the proper context and under the appropriate circumstances, specificity can be very effective in communication meaning. Unfortunately, too much specificity can give the reader (or listener) such inappropriate jolt that effective communication breaks down.

There times where specificity is the most effective way for facilitators to communicate with the group. Giving directions to an exercise, or teaching a group about new software are good examples. However, situations which involve respecting individual differences like handling group conflict, or gaining support from another person are best treated with vagueness and non-specificity. Thus people can fill in from their own models of the world. If a facilitator has the ability to use the full spectrum of language (precise and vague) they can enhance both flexibility and choices for the group.

Many people limit their range of communications keeping communications near the middle of that range - not too specific and not too vague. This is how most of us learn to communicate. Yet if we had to be specific all the time. "Pass the salt, please" would become a paragraph - "Bob, please pass me the sodium chloride in that red-capped bottle approximately six inches in front of your plate; use your right hand to lift it and ....." On the other hand, a lack of specificity can get us into trouble; "Seasoning, please" might get you tabasco sauce for your celery.

Developing the ability to be artfully vague or precisely specific takes skill and attention. Effective facilitators stretch their capabilities to encompass a wide range vague and specific language. You can learn to use precise, specific language to communicate exactly what's on your mind, and to employ the power of non-specificity and vagueness when you want to elicit other persons' meanings. Successful facilitators have the flexibility to use

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language fully.

EXAMPLES:

The following are examples of using both precise and vague language patterns in a meeting context.

Example #1 is Problem Solving: A facilitator can use a wider range of communications options to facilitate problem solving. When the group is stuck or at a standstill in the meeting, the facilitator could begin by asking "What's wrong?" but that might put the group on the defensive. Instead, use non-specific language to gain rapport and provide a more open communications environment: "It seems like we are stuck and that there are some concerns. Perhaps we can find ways to make things better." The non-specific "some concerns," "thing," and "better" offer an implied acceptance of the group's situation, while not committing it to any specific action.

Example #3 Action Planning: If the group's outcome is to prepare action plans for a project, the use of more specific language might be in order. "Develop an action plan," isn't likely to get the group what it needs to know. Instead this is a good time for the group to be specific. "Please write an action plan, about three or four pages long, that describes how we have gotten over-due and over-budget and what specific actions we should take to finish this project. This action plan will be completed by noon." There is still much unspecified (who'll do the typing of the plan?) but it is significantly more specific than "Gimme an action plan!"

A facilitator can test whether the group is being specific or not with a simple question: If the group had no prior knowledge, could it act based on the information provided right now? If the group wants a specific result or outcome, unless they communicate the specific details (evidence) to achieve their outcomes there is absolutely no reason to believe that the group will get what they want.

Exercises: Skill Builders

1. Facilitators can improve their ability to identify and use specific and non-specific language. Listen to the other people with whom you communicate. Ask yourself, "Is there enough specificity in what I hear so that I know what to do?" Be especially wary of guessing or interpreting meaning. If the group is working on developing a new budget, and says, "We've got to cut back," look for the degree of specificity. Does "cut back" mean on people, or dollars, or services? If the group assume it means dollars, it might miss the point that the company is being asked to stop hiring for a while.

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Reread some recent memos, both your own and others. What is expressed explicitly, what is vague? If you gave your correspondence file to an outside consultant tomorrow, what else would you have to communicate to make the content specific and meaningful? Who among your colleagues is most specific? Who is most artfully vague? Identify these people and observe them in future meetings. Learn new techniques and skills by observing, reflecting, and modeling their behavior.

There are simple drills that can help develop your ability to use precise language in everyday life. Practice describing exactly what you see. Imagine that you are describing what you see, hear or feel to someone who was temporarily blinded, deaf or deprived of the sense of touch. Leave as little as possible to the imagination. "The clouds in the sky" is not nearly so precise as "I see half the sky is filled with fluffy, billowing clouds, darker on the bottom than on top, which are moving eastward at about ten miles an hour, with sizes ranging from a dime held at arm's length to a basketball. I hear a low deep tone of the wind blowing into my right ear and I feel cool breezes on my face."

Specificity is enhanced if you use words like "must," "ought," and "will." These words leave little room for alternative interpretations.

Next, practice being as non-specific as possible while maintaining some "illusion" of communication. For example, in the midst of a meeting you're conducting, "Some people might have certain concerns that could be expressed" is certainly more vague than "Bob, you have something to say, don't you?" Practice producing sentences full of specificity, and others with non-specificity. These are great exercises to do in your head while you're forced to attend (or even facilitate!) some boring meetings.

While you're being non-specific you may find that words like "probably," "perhaps," and "might" create vagueness. These are words of permission and give the listener or reader the opportunity to imagine whatever is necessary to complete the idea you're expressing in their own way. "You might find it easier to do this way" leaves people with more opportunity to accept your idea than if you command "You ought to do it this way!"

Mastering Vague and Precise Language Patterns

Remember when you were learning to ride a bicycle or drive a car. During the first few tries, you were utterly concentrated on the task, and you ignored any idle chatter around you. Later, as you gained confidence, the behavior became more and more automated in your unconscious. Now, you can carry on a complex or even-emotion-charged conversation on your carphone while your body attends to the motor tasks of driving you where you want to go. Similarly, you may find that these exercises require some effort during the first few
days. However, try being precisely specific and then artfully vague at least three times each day. You may be amazed that after a couple of weeks the behavior has become automated in your unconscious. Your practice doesn't need to be work related, nor does it have to be aloud. Do your exercises silently at first: after a couple of days, experiment aloud in "unimportant" settings to find out how much you've learned.

Implications of Vague and Precise Language

Language provides the "anchors" or representations for our internal experience. Words do not mean anything without the experience underneath them. The primary usefulness of language is that it allows us to describe and share our "real" world experiences. The quality of these descriptions may vary from artfully vague (words that have multiple meaning, i.e., group dynamics) to clearly precise (words with specific meaning, i.e., fire). The ability to use language fully is a critical communication skill for effective facilitators.
OUTCOME DIRECTED COMMUNICATION:  
THE IMPORTANCE OF PRECISE LANGUAGE 

TWO SCENARIOS 

Scenario #1: The "Typical" Exchange 

Exchange of greetings and small talk occurs. Several minutes into the exchange the division manager (DM) introduces the "problem" to the General Manager (GM).

... (after small talk or middle of the meeting) ...

DM: (Bob)          I've got a problem here I wanted to bring up
GM: (Vikki)        Go right ahead, Bob ... What's the problem?
DM:                Well, it's my margins—they've slid some this last reporting period.
GM:                Yeah, I know, and you're right. When your margins slide, you've got a problem.
GM:                Yeah, well, I hope that you keep in mind that this is the first reporting period since I've taken over as division manager that my division profit margins have dropped.
GM:                I'm well aware of that, Bob. And as we both know, your margins are the bottom line. They are your primary responsibility as division manager. Now what's the problem?
DM:                Well, I've looked carefully at the situation and I really believe that the problem is head office overcharges.
GM:                What the hell is that supposed to mean—overcharges, head office overcharges? Are you trying to tell me that we charge your division higher prices for advertising or material or something? Look, I can show the figures for the charges against the other divisions and you can compare them with the charges against your division and you'll see that we play no favorites up here.
DM:                Wait, Vikki, I didn't mean that you play favorites or that you charge my division more than other divisions.
GM:                Well, if you believe that we're charging your division the same as the others then what's this talk about head office overcharges? It seems to me that you'd better look a little closer at your own operation.
Scenario #2 - The Goal/Outcome Directed Dialogue

(after greetings have been exchanged, a few minutes into the meeting between
the General Manager (GM, Vikki), and the Divisional Manager (DM, Bob).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Communication Technique</th>
<th>Dialogue</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>DM: ... I've got a <strong>problem</strong> here I wanted to bring up.</td>
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<tr>
<td>GM: Go right ahead, Bob (pause) ... you have a problem with what specifically?</td>
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<tr>
<td>DM: Well, it's just that my margins have been <strong>sliding</strong> some this last reporting period, and I'm concerned.</td>
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<td>(Noun Detector) GM: How specifically have your margins been <strong>sliding</strong>?</td>
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<td>DM: It's the same old story-my <strong>costs</strong> are up.</td>
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<tr>
<td>(Noun Detector) GM: Which costs in particular are up, Bob?</td>
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<tr>
<td>DM: Well, frankly, the costs are up because of <strong>head office overcharge</strong>.</td>
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<tr>
<td>(Noun) GM: Head office overcharges on what in particular?</td>
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<tr>
<td>DM: Well, I've looked carefully at that—it boils down to the <strong>interest figures</strong>.</td>
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<tr>
<td>(Noun) GM: The interest figures on what, Bob?</td>
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<tr>
<td>DM: On some of the <strong>inventory</strong>.</td>
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<tr>
<td>(Noun) GM: On what specific part of the inventory?</td>
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<td>DM: Well, primarily on all those motors.</td>
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<tr>
<td>(Universal) GM: On all those motors?</td>
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<tr>
<td>DM: No, not really on all the motors.</td>
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<tr>
<td>(Noun) GM: Well, then, on which motors in particular?</td>
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DM: OK, I understand. I'll take a closer look. Maybe I can tighten up production a bit...and have a talk with my sales manager.

GM: That's right! Get those sales reps of yours moving, Bob. If they know you're watching and interested in their performance they'll pick it up some. What's your sales manager's name, Bob? I remember him as being really good.

DM: Rob Brown, and he is really good, a real hustler.

GM: Yes, old Rob. By the way, you're really fortunate to have old Rob. In fact, I recommend strongly that you call Rob in an explain the situation to him—you know, build a fire under him. Once he understands the situation your division is in, he'll get his people out there—I remember Rob as being a real team man. You get my meaning, Bob?

DM: I think so, Vikki, I'll get together with Rob this coming week.
DM: On those newer type B motors.

GM: Let me make sure I've got this now-your margins are down because your costs are up. Specifically, the head office charges for interest on your inventory of type B motors have increased. (pause) ... That's the picture I've got - does that match your understanding?

DM: Yes, I think that we've tracked the problem down.

GM: Now, Bob, before we jump into figuring out what to do about this situation, let's make sure we agree about where we're going. Set a target for yourself. What evidence could you use to know that you have solved this problem?

DM: That's easy - if my margins are up.

GM: Up to what, Bob?

DM: ... I'm not sure that I understand what you're asking.

GM: You said if your margins are up-and I'm asking up how much - what are you shooting for?

DM: Oh, all right, well ... I thought that we did really well in the reporting period before this last one. If I could get us back to that level of margins, I'd be satisfied.

GM: And the principle difference between the performance in the reporting period before the last and the last reporting period is what, Bob?

DM: Like I said, the interest charges on inventory - everything else showed up pretty much the same.

GM: OK, Bob. Your goal would be the following - you'll get your margins back up by reducing costs specifically by decreasing the interest charges on your inventory of type B motors.

DM: Right! That's my target.
TWO SCENARIOS

Observations and Remarks

The above scenarios depicted problem-solving dialogues/meetings. The first example illustrated what many of us would recognize as a "typical" problem solving exchange between business associates - in the case a general manager and one of his division managers. This example appeared typical in that the interaction was vague and problem - focused with little evidence of a well-defined outcome (the problem was even ill-defined!). Thus the results were minimal other than the "complementary toast" to Rob Brown, the hustler!

The second scenario presented the "same" problem solving dialogue; however, this time the communication was outcome-directed and incorporated a number of frame clarification techniques i.e., pointers, challenges, backtracking outcome statements etc. (see indicators in margin). In this example the GM was able to generate higher quality information by listening and using specific purposeful questioning and clarification skills. The results of this exchange was a clearer more accurate picture of the "problem" as well as, a more precise description of the DM's desired outcome - his target to obtain the margins needed by reducing costs by decreasing interest on the inventory Type B motors.

In our daily business communication we typically use non specific or vague language rather than precise words or questions with explicit meanings. This imprecision allows the listener to make assumptions, interpretating and invent the meaning of the communication. Although vague language can be useful in many contexts (e.g., if the communicator desires that the listener fill in the meaning), facilitating problem-solving and planning dialogues requires a greater degree of precision. The success of such interactions depends to a great extent on our ability to elicit and express high quality (accurate, precise) information based on the dialogue outcome.