Is Gobbledegook Harming Your Organisation's Performance?

By Graham Kenny

Is the language in your strategic and business plans ruining any chance of their success? Is concept overload stifling your directors, managers and staff? Are you shooting yourself in the foot through management-speak? Many organisations are, and they're losing focus in the process.

How can directors, CEOs and senior executives recognise that they're on the road to ruin in this area? The following example is a case in point.

This government organisation is responsible for building and maintaining all the primary roads and bridges in the state. My role was to work with the CEO and the senior management team to help them produce a scorecard of key performance indicators. In the process, I produced a discussion paper for the corporate executive workshop to stimulate thinking and discussion. I called it: "Detecting When an Organisation is Becoming Unfocused." In the workshop, I described losing focus as losing a clarity in purpose.

I was struck by the number of superfluous terms developed to describe very similar concepts. As I put it to the executive team, one symptom of a lack of focus is the language that is used in documents such as strategic or business plans: too many terms chasing only a few substantive concepts. In the organisation's strategic plan, I found terms such as:

- 'Future challenges'
- 'Strategic response to future challenges'
- 'Areas of strategic focus'
- 'Strategic objectives'
- 'Key performance indicators'
- 'Strategic initiatives'
- 'Strategic directions'
- 'Strategic framework'
- 'Purpose'
- 'Vision'
- 'Values'

And this was just from reading the headings on four pages of the document!

Methods clashed with methods, frameworks conflicted with frameworks and confusion reigned supreme. Bureaucracy and administrative expense had mushroomed. I tried to demonstrate to the executive team that they had created a rod for their own backs, as it was *they* who had produced this confusion, leaving

both managerial and non-managerial staff perplexed. A word game had developed that ended up casting a pall over the organisation's true purpose.

Here are my suggestions to cut the baloney and boost performance in your organisation.

Minimise jargon. Jargon is the language peculiar to a trade or profession, providing a shorthand way of expressing ideas. But it can just as easily become pretentious, abounding in unfamiliar terms. As we've witnessed, it can even become unintelligible or meaningless. Gibberish creates misunderstanding about roles and responsibilities in the workplace and results in mistrust. It makes people feel inadequate, keeping them from buying into organisational purpose. As an obstacle to understanding, it ultimately impacts on their performance and the organisation's productivity.

Watch for circumlocution. This is a roundabout way of speaking that is becoming more and more common. It involves using too many words to express a thought. Indirect speech, cumbersome writing and indecipherable plans are the result. Managers who don't understand are reluctant to admit that they are completely in the dark. They go away feeling confused, frustrated and downright distrustful. Insist on direct and clear speech and writing. Don't accept obfuscation in place of understanding or complexity in place of genuinely helpful content.

Be focused. Confusing language can take an organisation off track. "Mission drift" occurs when an organisation unintentionally and ever so gradually moves away from its designed purpose. This is different from "mission shift," which is deliberate re-focusing. Clear language produces a clear mission – and an effective organisation.

If you keep things simple (but not simplistic) and state everything plainly, you'll be well on the way to producing a focused and high-performing organisation.

About the author

Graham Kenny is the managing director of the consultancy Strategic Factors, which specialises in strategic planning and performance measurement and is based in Sydney, Australia (www.strategicfactors.com). He is the author of *Crack Strategy's Code* (President Press, 2013).