

3 Steps to Avoid Being Misunderstood

Why is it that, as smart as we all are, we nonetheless sometimes sound like idiots to other people?

Have you ever tried to explain a brilliant idea to your co-workers – one that would save your company money and increase efficiency – only to be met with glassy stares or looks of utter confusion? You can almost see the big question marks over the heads of your listeners.

It's easy to blame the misunderstanding on the other person (or people), but the truth may be closer to home. Isn't it possible that the problem is that we tend to get so caught up with the beauty (or simplicity, or potential) of what we're trying to explain that we forget to explain it *effectively*? Another way of saying that is that we tend to talk from inside our own head, instead of trying to explain our ideas from inside our audience's head (or point of view.)

Let's look at three simple steps that will increase the odds that, the next time you have a brilliant new idea to explain, others will understand what you are trying to say.

1. Assume that others don't know what you know.

It seems obvious when you read it, but it is so obvious that we tend to ignore the implications. Remember, almost any human endeavor develops its own specialized vocabulary, including "short cuts" that make very little sense to the uninitiated.

For example, on an oil drilling rig, "making a trip" doesn't refer to a vacation. Instead, it's a short cut way of saying that drill pipe needs to be pulled out of the hole so that a dulled drill bit can be replaced with a new one.

Similarly, when it's time to take an "FOD walk" on an aircraft carrier, all hands know that it's not a new dance move. Instead, it's a shoulder-to-shoulder walk from one end of the flight deck to the other, looking for any object that could get sucked into a jet engine and cause Foreign Object Damage (FOD.)

When you want to explain a new idea, or make a presentation, or persuade others to your point of view, it's your job to make sure your audience has enough background information to understand the points you make. This leads us to the second step.

2. Do your due diligence.

Know your audience, and figure out what they need to understand in order to understand you. It isn't necessary to go back to the beginning of time and "over-educate" your audience every time you open your mouth. In order to get inside your audience's head, however, it is necessary to think about three aspects of your audience:

- **Perspective**

Think about what you know about the people you are presenting an idea to: what are their likely attitudes, common background, or experiences? Can you make any general assumptions about their points of view? Express your ideas in terms that fill in the gaps in understanding *before* they occur.

For example, if you are an accountant, don't talk to engineers the way you would talk to other accountants. Talk to engineers the way engineers like to be talked to.

- **Predisposition**

Generally speaking, some people's brains are wired up to make sense of what someone is saying by first understanding the "big picture." Other people first want the facts and specifics of a situation before they are led to the overall conclusion. If you're trying to present an idea to just one person, and you already have a good idea of what his or her predisposition is, then that's the way to start your explanation.

If you're talking a group (more than one person,) then the odds are that you will have a mixture of both kinds of predispositions in your audience. In that case, you need to explain things so that everyone can stay with you in your explanation.

- **People**

Let's say that you need to present an idea to a group of your colleagues about a new way to solve a problem in your company. Some of your audience will listen mostly for how this idea affects the specific people involved ("What will Darla in Accounting think about this?"), and others will be listening mostly to learn how it affects the corporate reporting structure or the physical layout of the company workspace ("What procedures will we have to change to use this idea?")

Once again, take the likelihood that you will have both kinds of people in your audience, and address all their likely concerns in order to keep them listening to your idea.

3. Murder your “darlings.”

Whew, that sounds extreme, doesn't it? Actually, this is a concept that authors struggle to live by. It applies when an author comes up with a word or phrase that seems so exactly “right” that he or she (the author) “falls in love” with it. It means that the author may use it even when it doesn't actually help make the point, just because the author loves it so much.

The problem is that, even though that “darling” – the word or phrase that seems so right – fits perfectly with the author's view of the world, if it doesn't fit with the reader's view of the world, then understanding is lost.

For example, you may have just had a brilliant idea of a way to solve a problem, but you haven't thought about it from others' points of view yet. The idea seems so beautiful, however, that you are sure that all you have to do is throw it out there and everyone will immediately “get it.”

Remember this: you could be wrong. Look at your “darling” idea or proposal from *others'* points of view as well as your own. Does it still make sense? If not, why not? What are the problems with your idea? Getting yourself into other people's heads helps you understand what's right and what's wrong with your idea. More importantly, it helps you craft the way you present and explain your ideas so that they resonate with the different perspectives and points of view of your audience.