

## **Do You Have Common Sense?**

Of course you have common sense! We all have it, right? But, if common sense is really common, why don't we see more of it?

### **What Is Common Sense?**

We tend to think of "common sense" or "common knowledge," as information or experience that is generally known and understood by everyone.

For example, it's easy to assume that everyone knows the difference between metric and non-metric measurement units – that is, between meters and yards. It turns out, however, about 11% of adults in this country don't know that a yard contains 36 inches and a meter has a bit more than 39 inches. (OK, for all you engineers out there, I know that a meter is 39.37 inches. Please don't email me.)

### **Common Sense Is What *You* Know, and That's the Rub!**

Common sense is the body of knowledge (information + experience) that each of us has acquired over the years. The important point is that your collection of education and experience is unique to you, just as my common knowledge is unique to me. The odds are close to zero that you and I have exactly the same knowledge and experience!

Where we can get into trouble is when we automatically assume that the person (or people) we are talking to know the jargon and understand the acronyms that are so basic to us. We don't think these terms need explaining because they are "*just common sense!*"

### **What's Jargon to You Can Sound Like Gibberish to Others**

Every human endeavor ends up with its own specialized vocabulary, or jargon. Have you ever tried to find out from the telephone company what those itemized charges on your monthly bill that are? (telephone company: "That's a partial charge for a fin-delta occurrence". "What is a fin-delta occurrence?" you ask. "...Blah, Blah, Blah"...more telephone company gibberish resulting in ringing in your ears that isn't your phone, it's your blood pressure soaring.)

Let's suppose you are giving a presentation to community leaders about a project your company is interested in. Without thinking about it, your talk uses industry-specific jargon the community leaders are not familiar with. They feel they were

being talked down to, which distracts them from the points you were trying to make and, as a result, your competition ends up getting the project.

### **Bureaucracies Love Acronyms (or, as they would say, BLAs)**

Acronyms are abbreviations that are formed from the first letters of words in a phrase, such as NASA for National Aeronautic and Space Administration.

Acronyms are useful shorthand when everyone involved understands them. However, if the person you're talking to isn't familiar with them, it can seem like you are playing a "gotcha" game called, "I know something you don't know." This can detract from your overall cool factor and lead to short conversations at parties and elsewhere.

Unconsciously assuming that everyone knows your "common knowledge/common sense" is clearly a problem you don't need.

### **To Avoid This Problem: Put Brain in Gear before Putting Mouth in Motion**

Don't make assumptions about your "common knowledge/common sense." Instead, think about who you are talking to. Is this person familiar with your jargon? Do they know your acronyms? Err on the side of caution by first carefully learning what terms they are familiar with.

In writing, help the reader understand your jargon and acronyms without being a bore about it. Write out an acronym's entire phrase the first time you use it (with the abbreviation in parentheses), and then you can use the acronym by itself. And, briefly explain jargon in simple words the first time you use it.

### **So, the Answer to the Basic Question, "Do you have common sense?" Is, Yes!**

But that's misleading. We do all have common sense, but we don't all share the *same* common sense!

This reminds me of a funny, but true, story: An actual rocket scientist, when asked what happened to cause one of his rockets to blow up on the launch pad, answered, "The rocket experienced RUD." (Translation of RUD: **R**apid **U**nscheduled **D**isasassembly.)

But you knew that, didn't you? It's just common sense.