

Multiple Meaning Disorder: interpreting vague conversations

by Alex Wray, President, The Wray Group



There is a chronic vagueness in business conversations.

“We need to think outside the box, think globally but act locally, and get everyone on the same page.”

Have you ever wondered, “What on earth are these people talking about? What does any of this *really* mean?” Yet, as you look around you in your meetings and conversations, everyone is nodding intelligently.

People are reluctant to look like the fool who doesn’t get it. In the meetings we facilitate, the conversation often requires clarification of these vague expressions, and when we do, it’s not unusual to get the ‘you mean you don’t know?’ stare. Then, as people start to clarify the point, the group often discovers that they had very different understandings of the meaning of these terms. The danger of not clarifying the meaning is that people are left with multiple interpretations, or Multiple Meaning Disorder (MMD).

The negative consequences of taking action based on multiple meanings can be mild to significant. The question you need to answer is whether it is a risk you can afford to take.

Here’s the first line of defense against MMD. Constantly test for clarity in your conversations by asking yourself, “Is the point the person is making clear enough that I can picture it?” If you can’t, probe for clarity. On the flip side, one of the worst assumptions you can make as a manager is to assume that everyone is interpreting your input the way that you intended. Even though you are absolutely clear about what you mean, other people may have very different interpretations if you don’t use precise language.

We recently worked on a business strategy with a new leadership team. One of their challenges was that one of their market segments was in its infancy and awareness for their service was low. Susan, Vice President of Marketing, was charged with the responsibility of ‘increasing awareness in the target market.’ In fact, her bonus depended on it.

I tried to picture the action, ‘increasing awareness in the target market,’ and it wasn’t easy. Even though the group seemed comfortable with the action item, and Susan had accepted this as one of her major deliverables, I decided to test for clarity. Expecting a relatively simple answer that would help flush this out a little, I said, “What does increased awareness in the target market look like?”

Am I glad I asked. Their responses generated more questions than answers. Was that awareness of that particular service or the overall category of services? Was that awareness for their brand or anyone’s brand? Was that awareness domestically or overseas?

It soon became apparent that they each had a very different idea of what this action item meant. Some interpreted it to mean creating awareness in the world market for their service. Others intended only the domestic markets. Still others had believed it was about awareness for the service the industry overall provided.

As her colleagues spoke, Susan’s face took on a strange colour, and she looked very uncomfortable. Eventually, she clarified that these different interpretations had huge implications for her group, and were quite different from what she had originally signed up for. With her budget and resources, she had no way of building a market to the extent that her colleagues had expected.

Together, we wrestled through the various interpretations, clarified the implications of each with respect to resource requirements, and then arrived at an agreement around what exactly was meant by ‘*increasing awareness in the target market.*’ The clarifying discussion resulted in numerous assumptions being flushed out and documented; several associated actions documented; and a greater understanding of the support and collaboration that Sue’s team would require for success.

After a 45-minute discussion, we had cured ourselves of MMD and held a common understanding of what had to be done. A quiet intensity took over the group. Each knew exactly what they had to do in order to achieve this goal.

I asked, “So what’s different about how you’re thinking now?” Ted, the Director of Development, responded, “It seems so much more real, whereas before it just seemed like the same old talk.” Heads nodded.

Susan almost began to speak, once, twice – she appeared to be struggling to find the words. Everyone’s gaze fell on her. Then, she found the words – “It actually feels like something will get done.” She smiled and the others concurred.

“In a sense,” Sara, the VP Operations, continued, “it is as though we’ve already done it, because we’ve all got such clarity as to what precisely we want to do and what actions are required to do it.”

Operating with different and even conflicting interpretations leads to inaction, confusion and ineffectiveness. By clarifying assumptions and using language with precision, your team will operate with far more confidence, coordination and also accountability.

The next time you hear a ‘vague communication,’ resist the temptation to simply assume you know what is meant. Try this...

1. **Test your interpretation** of what has been said. For instance, “So, by thinking outside of the box, you mean that we need to be less judgmental of each others suggestions. Is that correct?” At worst, people will agree, give you ‘the look’ and the conversation will move on. More often than not, you will help them clarify their ideas and spark debate around the issues.
2. **Ask a probing question** that will get at the meaning of the communication and build clarity for everyone. “What do you mean when you say, ‘We must think outside of the box?’”

When speaking to your colleagues, especially when it comes to goals, action items or other things that require execution, make sure language is used with the precision of a master craftsman:

- **No buzzwords, jargon or metaphors.** It may be the easy way out, but simple, clear language will win every time. Do you really expect people to execute on goals such as ‘Think outside of the box’? Even if they try, it’s likely to be much different

- **No vague language.** Rather than, “We’ll need to deliver this prototype by the third quarter,” try, “We’ll need to deliver this prototype by July 1.”

One of the really great benefits of this type of clarity in communications is accountability and action-ability. I bet you’re looking forward to hearing your next cliché! ●

About Alex Wray

Alex Wray, President of Wray Group, is an accomplished consultant, facilitator and public speaker with an international client list.

Since 1993, Alex Wray has worked with executives and senior managers, from Singapore to Copenhagen, in the areas of strategy and leadership. He has facilitated

hundreds of meetings for teams of executives and middle managers in the areas of strategy development and implementation, leadership, and teambuilding.

For more information on the Wray Group, please visit their web site at www.wraygroup.com.



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