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Quit talking like a corporate geek

Why Business People Speak Like Idiots: A Bullfighter's Guide

By Brian Fugere, Chelsea Hardaway, Jon Warshawsky
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By Lyn Millner
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Remember the voice of Charlie Brown's teacher? A muted trombone "wah-wa-wah-wah-wah." You never saw her in those TV specials. She was only that noise coming from the front of the classroom.

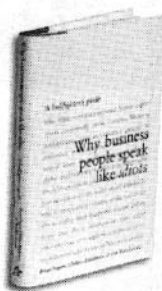
That is the sound of Corporate America speaking, or it might as well be. An example (hypothetical, of course): "Our end-to-end, mission-critical solutions create synergy for best-of-breed market leaders." Wah. Wah. Wah.

You know that corporate language has reached new depths when three accountants raise their voices in protest, which is what Brian Fugere, Chelsea Hardaway and Jon Warshawsky do in *Why Business People Speak Like Idiots*. Fugere and Warshawsky work for Deloitte Consulting. Hardaway is a former Deloitte.

Their charming manifesto urges business people to bring their personalities to work. When you speak or write or make a presentation, don't be afraid to tell stories, they advise. Or to admit your own fallibility; to call things as you see them; to be spontaneous, entertaining and honest. When you do, your audience respects and listens to you. The authors take their own advice to heart. They dedicate the book to Mr. T, who said, "Don't gimme none o' that jibba-jabba!" Lively examples range from Lincoln and Churchill to the children's book *Goodnight Moon* (all three are given as models of authentic, compelling voices). They point out that *Who Moved My Cheese?* was a business best seller not because it delivered world-class change-management solutions, but because it told a story.

This book identifies four traps of communication: obscurity (empty, wordy, full of jargon), anonymity (commitment-phobic, antiseptic), hard-sell (puffy, free of bad news, condescending), and tedium (zzzzz).

The authors rail against the dangers of PowerPoint



Excerpts

On brevity

- ▶ Short presentations pack a punch. (Guys like Lincoln used this technique.)
- ▶ Short sentences are more memorable than long ones . . . 21 words starts to become long.
- ▶ One-syllable words build momentum and give the long ones impact. (Churchill knew a lot of long words, but when it mattered most he shelved those in favor of short ones.)

On jargon

Jargon is not just about using big words to make small points. Sometimes it's about using big words to make no point at all. For example, business idiots have figured out that when they don't have a real strategy, they can just string together a bunch of nonsense and make one up. And since so many other companies are in on the game, no one really notices.

templates, lament the misuse of the Frequently Asked Question, and counsel readers to use e-mail responsibly.

Though packed with humor, the book points to more serious issues concerning the blanding of Corporate America. They assert that the Challenger disaster might have been prevented if engineers had worded their reports more clearly. And they illustrate how people use language as a smokescreen. They cite letters to shareholders in the annual reports of two types of companies — those that are respected and admired (including Google), and those recently investigated for scandal (Enron). They find that the admired companies used plain language, while the letters from CEOs with something to hide often were indecipherable.

Vapid communication is everywhere, the authors prove. And this spells opportunity for you. Without much effort, they say, you will stand out from the crowd.

But don't keep this book to yourself. Read it. And then give it to everyone you work with. Slip it onto your boss's chair after hours. Foist it onto colleagues who use words and phrases like "win-win," "value add," "think out of the box," "utilize" and "strategic." By doing so, you just might transform the paradigm of your global enterprise.