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Going forward, please pivot to less jargon

Corporatespeak

Edmund Tadros

This customer-centric communication has content that seeks to, in the fullness of time, outline the curated learnings of an SME who will unpack the reasons why corporate changemakers love to continually circle back to words and phrases that sound impactful but really need to be decomplexified.

Or, in plain English: Gabrielle Dolan, who teaches business people how to communicate clearly, will explain in this article why professionals use so much jargon and suggest how they can cut down the use of these words and terms.

The spread of corporatese has clearly irritated readers of *The Australian Financial Review*. A request for examples of corporate doublespeak from our fortnightly reader poll generated more than 130 responses, including terms that have worked their way into everyday speech such as "pivot", "reach out" and "touch base".

This is in addition to the response to the #REF! column in the Professional Life newsletter. The column, which decodes corporate jargon, has led to readers sending in dozens of suggestions, including "agile", "digital transformation", "moving forward", "socialise" and "unpack". A common thread is that many of these words and terms are beloved by consultants. (#REF! refers to an error message the spreadsheet program Excel displays when a formula references a cell that no longer exists.)

Ms Dolan, the author of six books on business storytelling (which some might also label a buzzword), says jargon is used for four reasons: to avoid being the bearer of bad news, to make the speaker sound important, to be accepted into a closed group and when the speakers are not aware that the term is jargon.

"The first reason is avoidance – I think people can use jargon to avoid delivering bad news," she said. "The problem is it leads to distrust. It often happens when companies are going through restructures. We don't want to say that people will 'lose their job', so we talk about 'rightsizing' instead."

The second reason is to sound important, a trick that often works – for a short time at least.

"People want to sound important and they use it a lot in job interviews. It can make people sound important initially, but then people will start to see through it," Ms Dolan said.

She cited the example of a former colleague who continually used the term "executional excellence" to describe what the team was doing.

Confused by what he actually meant, Ms Dolan asked him. The problem was

To reduce jargon, Gabrielle Dolan asks: Is this how you would describe something to a 7-year-old?

he replied using even more jargon.

"I asked him to explain it again, in simpler terms, and he said: 'Once we decide to do something and let's make sure we do it right.' I asked him to just say that instead."

The other two reasons to use jargon are when professionals want to be accepted by a group, usually their colleagues, which can lead to corporatespeak being used unconsciously.

Four years ago, Ms Dolan was so sick of hearing jargon she set up a website, Jargon-Free Fridays, to ask users to give it a break – for one day of the week at least.

> ### Ballerinas, basketballers, netballers – they're the ones that can pivot.
> Gabrielle Dolan, author

The site offers up consulting favourites such as "boil the ocean", "cookie cutter" and "move the needle" as examples of now commonplace jargon.

"It's a fun way to raise awareness. It's pretty hard to give up jargon, so why not try it for one day a week?" she said.

"The one word that triggers me at the moment is 'pivot', the overuse of the word 'pivot'. When did we stop changing and start pivoting? Ballerinas, basketballers, netballers – they're the ones that can pivot," Ms Dolan said.

She has some simple advice for any professional wanting to cut down on their use of jargon: "I typically ask: is this how you would describe something to a 7-year-old? That gets them thinking about the words they are using and often makes them aware they are even using jargon. As long as people you're speaking to understand it, that's OK."

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