

We Don't Know What We're Talking About

Bill Barnes

Some time before 64 years and four months ago, Eric Blair wrote an essay about the misuse of words in public discussion. The essay has echoed down the decades; its themes are often heard in new essays (like this one) on sloppy and misleading use of language that has political consequences.

The April 1946 essay argued that “the slovenliness of our language makes it easier for us to have foolish thoughts.” But the “process is reversible.” If one “gets rid of bad habits, one can think more clearly.” Thinking more clearly is a “necessary first step toward political regeneration.” Among the bad habits is “meaningless words.”

Blair used the pen name of George Orwell. He titled the essay “Politics and the English Language.” (As Orwell, he also wrote *Animal Farm* and 1984, both of which reflect his concern with the political power of language.)

Orwell's critique about meaningless words applies today. For example, what is “sustainability?” Well, then, how about “civic engagement?” “the free market?” “closing the borders?” “livability?” “smart growth?” Each of these terms encompasses such a wide and changing range of idiosyncratic meanings that use of it tells us little about the topic.

Then there's “green.” Kermit The Frog warned that “it's not easy being green,” but enthusiasts are not daunted by puppets.

And let's not even get started on “economic development” or “regionalism.”

These and many other terms are widely used. They have a certain force, but it's not clear what they mean or rather, it is clear that they mean far too many things.

“When I use a word,” Humpty Dumpty explains to Alice in *Through the Looking Glass*, “it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less.”

“The question is,” asks Alice, “whether you can make words mean so many different things.”

“The question is,” said Humpty Dumpty, “which is to be master that's all.”

In contrast, Orwell urges that we “let the meaning chose the word, and not the other way around.”

Of the two, Orwell is right, but Humpty offers the better description of how we talk about politics and policy.

What are the consequences of this vagueness and multiplicity of meanings? One is that conversation is rendered meaningless; we all merely talk to ourselves. So, everyone can be enthusiastic about “sustainability,” and everyone is dissatisfied with the action that ensues because it's not what they meant.

A recent study by Eric Zeemering in the *Urban Affairs Review* investigated what “sustainability” means to local officials throughout the San Francisco Bay Area. He found that the term has “multiple meanings” to them including, for example:

mixed use near transit hubs, green building standards, pedestrian and bike routes, retaining current businesses, human capital development, neighborhood revitalization, and resident participation.

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Similarly, Ben Berger, writing in *Perspectives on Politics*, declares that “Civic engagement is ready for the dustbin,” not because public involvement is useless but because the term “means so many things to so many people that it clarifies almost nothing.” It includes the “entire ‘kitchen sink’ of public and private goods”: numberless political processes and issues, as well as all kinds of participation in social groups and activities.

Rich Harwood, a long-time civic engagement advocate, recently “banned” the term from his organization's work because it “has become a catch-all.” It promotes mindless activity, which, in turn, causes people to “lose sight of our real purpose.”

Another currently prevalent example of Orwellian “meaningless words” is the “creative class,” the latest bid in the

sweepstakes Marx founded to locate the group that is allegedly in the vanguard of history. Laura Reese and Gary Sands (in the journals, *Canadian Public Administration* and *Journal of Urban Affairs*) suggest that no one knows exactly who is in and who is not in the creative class or exactly how this group's presence “relates to economic growth.” Therefore, there are likely to be “no effective policy levers” that will produce targeted results.

Reese and Sands provide a nicely tart concluding and summary note that echoes Orwell: “If vague concepts are vaguely understood, then their meaning will always be in doubt...[and] there is little prospect that [they] will provide useful public policy guidance.”

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Honest Assessment is Key to Strategic Recovery

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mission. This often involves managers choosing to take or to blend a pragmatically capitalist approach—determining how much revenue is needed and how to achieve it—with a customer or market-driven approach—and a public service approach. Managing cash flow and time often involves a re-evaluation of cash flow forecasts and improvement opportunities, capital spending, and working capital with the multiple purpose of improving revenue generation, buying more time to accomplish the recovery plan, re-engaging elected officials, government partners and middle management with specific details and deliverables as well as creating stakeholder confidence that things are now under control.

Rebuilding trust through authentic communication involves first defining what is re-

quired to develop/recover trust and how to measure it. There is no international performance standard or definition of trust. It is specific to the organization, its mission and its stakeholders. It starts by managers asking and answering: what's in it for me, the stakeholder? Is it about quality of service, benefits, damages to reputation or costs in terms of time and inconvenience? The next step to rebuilding trust involves assessing and improving the quality and quantity of interactions with each stakeholder and minimizing their perceived risk in participating at some level in the recovery plan.

In my opinion, to be successful in this area will require managers to stand in the shoes of their stakeholders and genuinely understand their current perspectives. It also requires that managers and organizations do not try to cover up problems faced or be something that

they are not. Simply put, a quickly made, sincere apology and acceptance of responsibility goes a long way to re-establishing a base from which to build trust after a crisis.

Strategic recovery from crises requires planning and preparation as well as the consideration of events and impacts that managers, citizens, partners and stakeholders would rather not think about. It requires honest assessments of the causes of the crisis and the five areas of leadership expertise that need to work in order to be better prepared next time. Leading after a crisis is one of the most challenging experiences a public manager can expect to face, but it can also be one of the most rewarding.

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