

## When Intent Doesn't Match Outcome: Improving Our Communication through Awareness

By Susan Washburn

Recently, a student relayed a story that really illustrated the problem with vague language in communication. She told the class that the young man who was renting an apartment from her had fallen behind in his rent payments. She decided to confront him and try to reach some agreement about the payments.

After trying to get full payment and having the young man repeatedly say apologetically that he simply did not have the money, she tried another approach. "I cannot afford to just let you live for free so, please, pay me as much as you can by the end of the week." She left hopeful, feeling as though the young man was honest and that she had done more than enough to compromise.

However, the end of the week came and went with no payment. So, again, she confronted the young man. "I thought we agreed that you would pay me as much as you could by the end of the week," she told him. "We did," responded the young man. "But I couldn't pay you anything."

### Why Outcome Doesn't Always Match Intent

This example is a perfect illustration of when our intended communication doesn't achieve the desired outcome. All communication starts with intent. We hope to achieve something by sending the message. We then take action — either an e-mail, a phone call, a written letter or some other form of communication. What happens next is the outcome.

Does our outcome match our intent? If not, why?

It could be the words chosen. Commonly cited research attributes only 7% of communication to the words we choose. How often do we choose a word that can be misinterpreted or misunderstood?

It could also be the medium. Should we have picked up the phone rather than sending an e-mail? Would face-to-face communication be more effective?

And lastly, have we taken into account all of the possible filters that might "corrupt" our intended message? Memory can be a powerful filter — "when this happened before, we got this result." We often assume filters based on gender. Sometimes we are right and sometimes we aren't. In her book *Talking from 9 to 5*, Deborah Tannen states, "Saying that men talk about baseball in order to avoid talking about their feelings is the same as saying that women talk about their feelings in order to avoid talking about baseball."

In addition to memory and gender, there are many more filters, such as communication style, language, mood and context. Frankly, it is a miracle we ever understand one another!



## Think Before You Communicate

Going back to the example, what could the landlord have done to achieve shared meaning and the outcome she was looking for? Of course, it is probably relatively clear now — she should have been specific about the amount of money she expected, and at least required a minimum payment.

But, we don't always think of that when we are communicating with others. It is clear to us what we mean, so we assume the listener or receiver will understand our intent. Alas, that doesn't happen anywhere nearly as often as we might hope. The news is full of misquotes, mistakes, missteps and worse. Our project environment is not safe from this either. What can we do to ensure that our intent matches the outcome?

The key is awareness. Once we acknowledge that our message is more likely to be misunderstood than understood, we can begin to apply thought and effort to crafting our message more carefully, thereby increasing the likelihood of being understood.

## References

Tannen, Deborah. *Talking from 9 to 5*. New York: Harper-Collins, 1994.

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