Slogan Leadership

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*"The difference between the almost right word and the right word is
really a large matter – 'tis the difference between the lightning-bug and
the lightning."*   -Mark Twain

Oh how I love babblespeak. You know, meaningless drivel that pours out of people's mouths, a steady stream of acronym- and jargon-laden speech that makes as much sense to me as ravens crowing. Everybody does it; we all do. It's part of being a member of the exclusive corporate club, the enterprise equivalent of a secret gang handshake that identifies you as a member of the inner circle. More like the seventh circle of Hell.

"This is just the kind of synergistic, paradigm-based, customer-centric, upsell-driven, churn-reducing, outside-the-box, customizable, strategically tactical, best-of-breed, seamlessly integrated, perfectly-architected, actionable and ideated – not to mention leveraged content, along with multi-channel thought leadership that will help keep our clients on track to true north. Let's fly this up the flagpole and see where the pushback is."

A few years ago somebody sent me a bingo game called Bulls**t Bingo. Instead of numbers in each square there are words – the kind that show up in modern enterprise speech and written documentation (and that appear in the preceding paragraph). The idea behind the game (which is incredibly fun, by the way – there's even an app that you can use to play with your friends during meetings) is to mark a square when the word in that square is used during the meeting. When you get a complete line either up down or diagonally, you scream out "Bulls**t!"

There is a time and a place for acronyms; there is rarely a good time for jargon. Acronyms make it easier for people in a particular industry to communicate because (1) they all know what the acronyms mean and (2) they save time because it's easier to say "TDR" than it is to say "Time Domain Reflectometer, or "DWDM" rather than "Dense Wavelength Division Multiplexing." We have to be careful when using them in mixed company (i.e., telecom people shouldn't say things like DWDM or CDMA or ISDN when there are Muggles about).

So what do we mean by jargon? Here's a definition from Google: *Special words or expressions that are **used by a particular profession or group** and are **difficult for others to understand**. A form of language regarded as **barbarous**, debased, or hybrid.*
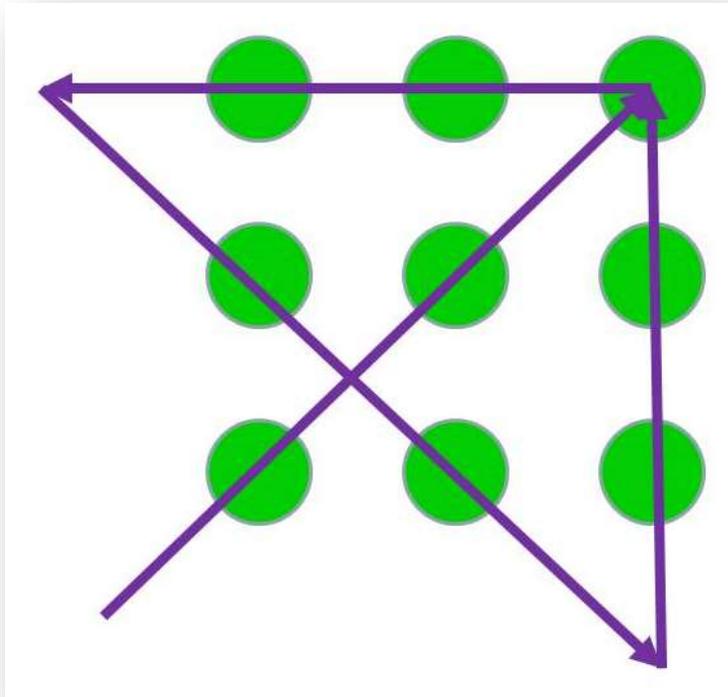
That pretty much captures it. Here's the problem: Using jargon in a sentence is like using inferior products when you build a house. The result is an inferior house that will ultimately not stand. Jargon weakens language - it's as simple as that. For example, how often do you hear the expression, "think outside the box." Do you have any idea what it means? Or where it came from? Or why we use it so much? It has become so widely used that it has completely lost its meaning. It comes from the exercise that you can see at left. Draw nine dots as shown. Now, without picking up your pen, connect the dots with four lines ONLY. You cannot pick up your pen from the paper. The point is that you have to "go outside the box" created by the dots to do it. See what I mean by meaningless jargon? The phrase means nothing until it is placed in context. And by extension, the person using the phrase doesn't have much impact either.

Corporations are awash in what I call "Slogan Leadership." As long as the leader uses the appropriate jargon to communicate with the company, the customer, or the market, all is good. But is it? Do people really understand? I happen to know that the answer is, ABSOLUTELY NOT.

So here's an exercise for you. Try to go an entire work day without using any jargon or acronyms at all. In fact, you can make it more interesting by agreeing to put a dollar into your pocket for every jargon-word you use during the workday. Then, at the end of the day, you can take yourself and your significant other for a nice dinner at Ruth's Chris Steakhouse.

Here's my point: Jargon weakens storytelling. The less you use, the more you rely on simple, clear language, the more impactful your story will be. Trust me on this and give it a try.

Thanks for reading.