

# Your Clarity Quotient: Beware the Blank Stare

By Dianna Booher

“You can’t just go anywhere at any time you like,” the warden at the federal prison explained to the soon-to-be parolee. “You’re going to be wearing an ankle sensor to allow the parole officer to monitor your whereabouts. You’ll be allowed to leave your house between 7 a.m. and 6 p.m. for work. But other than that, you’ll have only a small window of opportunity to leave your house. Do you understand?”

“Yeah. Just which window should I use?” the convict asked.

Conversations around your conference table or dinner table sometimes may not be much clearer than this miscommunication the prison warden shared with me. Both written and spoken snafus surface everywhere. The difference between success and tragedy may hinge on a garbled statement, a single misused word, an unstated assumption, an invalid conclusion, a euphemism, or a nonverbal cue that nixes the verbal.

We all *think* we’re clear communicators; otherwise, we wouldn’t say what we do. So what signals trouble, and which safeguards ensure success?

## Beware the Blank Stare

At my “Get Your Book Published” boot camp, I was leading attendees to formulate their book idea for a proposal to a literary agent. It was Susan’s turn to “pitch” her book concept to the group. After her pitch, the group fell totally silent—not a word of feedback from anyone. Finally, someone spoke up, “I don’t get it—could you elaborate?” She gladly did so for the next five minutes. Gradually, the group “caught” her concept—and gave her intriguing feedback for the next ten minutes.

But then the strangest thing happened: During the remainder of the seminar, Susan never changed the way she worded her pitch letter—even after it met with that first collective blank stare. It seemed not to occur to her that her original pitch lacked clarity—that if nobody “got it,” she should change the way she expressed the written pitch.

The same thing happens on the job. The boss drafts a report and asks a staff member to proofread it. The assistant brings the report back with a section marked and says, “I don’t understand what you mean here,” To which, the boss replies, “Oh, that’s technical—it’ll be clear to the lawyers when they review it.” Two weeks later, the lawyers ask for a rewrite of the same section.

I’ve watched this scene unfold time and time again. People always assume the confusion happens on the other end of the communication—that what they themselves say is perfectly clear and that the *other* person just missed it somehow. A better gauge of our own clarity: Beware the blank stare.

## **Start with the Punch Line**

Mike Duffy, a former senior manager working for a subsidiary of Occidental Petroleum, learned this principle the hard way. During the transition period after his company was acquired, his team had been experiencing delays in getting their budgets approved for special projects. One specific pipeline repair presented what his engineering team considered a grave danger. The vice president of operations of the acquired division wrote memo after memo over a six-month period, asking for budget approval on money to repair the pipeline. No response from headquarters.

The situation reached a critical point one Friday while I was in Mike's organization working on another project. He mentioned his concern and asked me to take a look at his document requesting the budget approval to repair the pipeline. The problem was immediately apparent. His punch line—his request for approval for the money to repair the dangerous pipeline—was literally in the last paragraph of the two-page document. I suggested that he reverse the structure.

By the following Tuesday, Mike had his money—along with this note from the legendary Armand Hammer, then CEO of Occidental: “Why haven't I been notified of this problem before now?” The documents had repeatedly landed on his desk apparently unread because the bottom-line message remained buried.

People may argue that others won't understand the message without a little background information. But actually the opposite is true: People will never understand the background until they know your point.

You understand this principle every time you listen to a voicemail that sounds like an autobiography before the caller gets around to stating their purpose and phone number.

Granted, there are exceptions: Movies, TV sitcoms, and jokes. Before the network takes you to commercial, the teaser plunges you into the middle of the action. Then for the next half hour, you wind your way out of the dilemma. But for those information sessions where amusement is not the primary focus, start with the punch line.

Whether delivering a presentation, writing an email, or briefing somebody in the hallway, make the opening line the punch line.

## **Make Sure Your Nonverbal Cues Don't Contradict Your Words**

Tell a non-performer that her behavior is unacceptable, but smile and nod encouragement at the wrong time during your discussion, and she may walk out thinking “no big deal” and go back to the status quo. Announce to the media that the customer reports about defects in your product are isolated incidents—but do it with a furrowed brow and you may have lawyers soliciting class-action claims by noon. Tell your team that “things are under control” and that you have the boss's complete confidence. But do it with a nervous fidget and they may wonder if you'll hold your job long enough to report the team's recommendations at all.

Words alone never carry the complete message. Messages come from context, relationship, tone of voice, what was said, what was not said, and body language. All these things together comprise the total message that people “hear.” Remember: Things are always clear to you: otherwise, you wouldn’t have said or written what you did. The official test of clarity? The results you see.

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