

# SUSAN LAZAR CONSULTING, INC.

## *Strategies for Business*

### **Speaking Another's Language: How to Become Multilingual in English**

By Susan Lazar, Founder and President

#### **Case in Point**

Despite our history of working together, my meeting with Joe was not going well. We were supposed to be talking about a thorny staffing issue in his business, but it was clear that Joe's mind kept wandering.

I paused our dialogue, realizing I was losing him. He wasn't offering any ideas, solutions, or ways to address the problem. In fact, he seemed to be barely listening. And then I remembered: Joe speaks math fluently.

He's a numbers guy, a financial whiz and Stanford-educated engineer. He's happiest with a calculator in front of him, not an org chart. So I translated what I was saying into his language:

"You've got Jane as Factor X and Eddie as Factor Y," I started, sketching the beginnings of an equation on a notepad. "Where X and Y currently meet, they are not combining well." Both employees were being territorial about responsibilities and having difficulty working together. "So what we need to do is figure out how to change this equation. What do we need to add in or multiply or solve for so that X and Y can equal Z, which is optimum productivity?"

Bingo – Joe grabbed my pencil. "I can figure this out," he said. And a few calculations later, we hadn't solved the problem, but we had made enormous headway on it.

His enthusiastic response reminded me of how important it is to express ourselves in ways that make sense to others. I think of it as being multilingual in English.

**Learning to Communicate Multilingually**  
Language can be remarkably imprecise. Even people who know each other very well – business partners or family members, or both – can be communicating in largely

differently languages when they work on important issues, or even in casual encounters. By honing their skills as multilingual communicators, they can start to circumvent the misunderstandings that arise from being on different wave lengths.

There are entire libraries of books and articles about the how, why, when and where of communicating effectively. However, my work has taught me that good communication usually boils down to saying directly what's important to you and to having others understand it by communicating it with examples and words familiar to the recipient.

#### **Goal: Think like They Think**

A doctor friend of mine recently did just that. His patient, a gentleman with high cholesterol, didn't understand the distinction of good versus bad cholesterol and the various drugs available. After several attempts at explanation, my friend hit on the right example and said to his patient, "Let's think about it like we do the different types of motor oil. There are different weights and consistencies of motor oil for different conditions and cars. And the mechanic or driver must use the right oil for their specific conditions. We have to consider your specific circumstances and find the right medication for you." It was an "aha" moment for the patient. He understood, and the chances immediately increased that he would fully participate in the treatment his physician recommended.

In our busy lives, we tend to do everything quickly. Most of us don't attend to whether the person to whom we're speaking really understands and absorbs what it is we're trying to communicate. Honing multilingual skills requires us to slow down and really attend to the needs of the recipient.

#### **Ask For Feedback**

Don't assume the recipient of your message understands. Ask what's clear in the

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message, as well as what isn't clear. In important conversations, ask the other person to convey back to you what you've communicated, and note any discrepancies in what you meant and what you said.

Asking questions is a terrific way to address and resolve all kinds of communications tangles. By asking questions, we let the other person know that we've heard what they have to say and are interested in their reaction. We are also acknowledging that the other party or parties may have some valuable input for the discussion.

And clarifying the request is another opportunity to determine whether my colleague and I are "speaking the same language".

### **Listen to Hear**

On the recipient's side of the interchange, there are additional challenges. Often instead of really digesting what's being said to them, listeners are not fully involved - - they are not hearing the message. Sometimes it's obvious from the expression on the listener's face or look in his or her eyes. They are busy formulating a response to what they believe is being asked or said. As a result, they're not fully integrating the information that's being presented. It reminds me of what sometimes happens on the game show, Jeopardy. Contestants push the buzzer to indicate they have a question in response to the host's answer. Occasionally they push that buzzer before host Alec Trebek has even finished the answer. Sometimes, they guess correctly. Other times, their guess is way off the mark. In business and our personal lives, we really can't afford guessing what someone is saying. It's critical to slow down and wait until we have all the information before we respond.

### **Use Examples the Listener Can Relate To**

As points of reference, I've found it useful to use examples that are familiar and comfortable to the listener. Obvious choices are mathematical examples for accountants or medical examples for physicians.

Parenting examples resonate with many people, since they have experience being parented or being parents themselves! Since concepts resonate for people based on their personal and family history, educational and technical background, and business experiences, it's very important to consider those factors as well as you communicate with others.

### **In Conclusion**

Developing multilingual facility with English opens up doors for vastly improved communication. It requires practice, as learning to speak any language does. But the rewards are worth it: greater creativity, stronger connections, and fewer misunderstandings over which motor oil to use.

### **About the Author**

Susan Lazar, the president of Susan Lazar Consulting, Inc., works with individuals, families, businesses and foundations. She specializes in helping individuals who are in business build on their strengths so that they can resolve differences, work together effectively, make decisions, and plan for the future.

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