THE TOWER OF BABEL REPRISED

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If, like me, you 'do projects', it is unlikely that you have seen a job description in recent years that does not require 'good communication' or interviewed anyone that has anything but 'excellent communication skills'.

All leaders are good at getting their message across (according to virtually any leadership guru) and all Senior Responsible Owners (SRO's) are leaders so, logically, are great communicators too.

If programme and project people are good-to-great and SRO's are even better, why do we keep getting things wrong/slowing things down/confusing ourselves and staff doing the hard work (delete as appropriate) because of things we have said or written?

Are you getting your message across?

I have a simple, yet indisputable, answer. We are not as good at communicating as we think. There, I said it. Those of us who are supposed to lead things and know all the answers are not good in a key area where we know we should be exceptional.

I am not going to go into a Chomskyan[1] analysis about why, but I will give scenarios which may resonate with you, note their impact and suggest how to avoid them.

However you need to do one thing before reading any further - you need to accept that you may not always get your message across as you intended. If not, you need to refer back to the Pratchett 'gem' above - are you that tourist?

Language is powerful and, within programmes and projects seems to do, broadly, three things.

However you need to do one thing before reading any further - you need to accept that you may not always get your message across as you intended.

"In an instant he became aware that the tourist was about to try his own peculiar brand of linguistics, which meant that he would speak loudly and slowly in his own language"
Terry Pratchett

1 - Language sets context

You say potato….

I am responsible for a portfolio that usually contains 20ish large programmes and projects. The turnover is 20% to 30% per year. Increasingly we are working with partners where the language differences between us are illuminating.

Working with the NHS recently, we have had to agree a term that the partners are all comfortable with, for the people we engage with. So far we have gone through *client*, *service user*, *citizen*, *resident*, *patient*, *customer* and have now settled on 'people'!

It is a small thing but it is important as this project is not dealing with subsets of people based on organisational definitions or preconceptions, it is designed to serve everyone.

The moment we introduce those terms, we change the dynamic (and power balance) between the individual and 'serviceland' - which would be self defeating in this case.

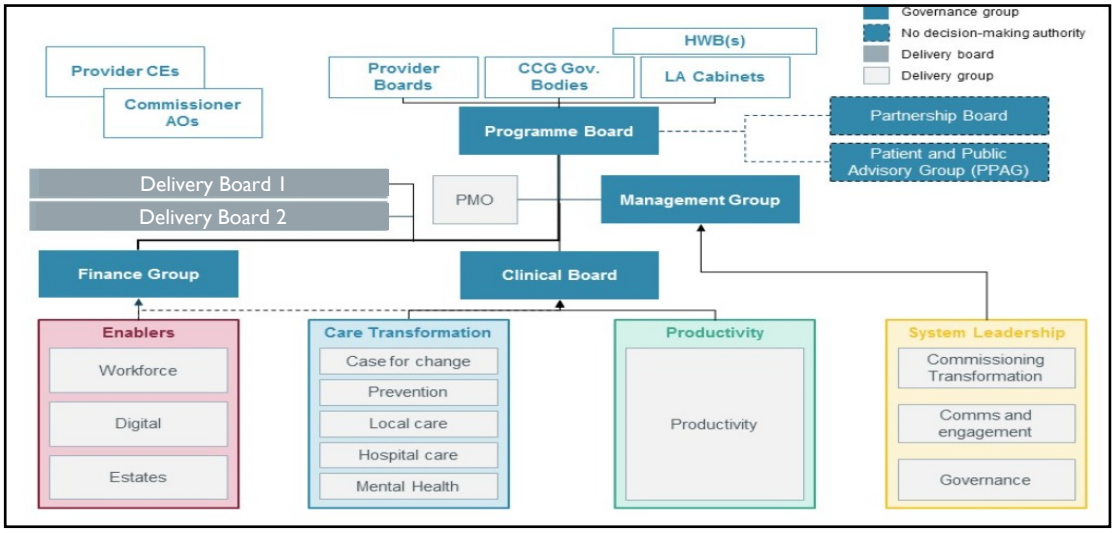
2 **- Language sets direction**

Mokusatsu

You can 'Google' the Mokusatsu incident, but the summary is that a dodgy translation from Japanese to English may well have caused nuclear attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

Frequently I observe people using project management speak and watch nodding dogs, unconvinced that they share an understanding.

[1] *Noam Chomsky is a psychologist, linguist, and political activist known both for his theory of innate grammar and for his political activism.* https://chomsky.info/



If you are a public servant, you have acquired organisational speak and it is your responsibility not to exclude people with it.

We are beset with the challenge of defining inputs, outputs and outcomes (let alone actually agreeing them!) - usually followed by some whizz who wants to crowbar 'impact' in as if they are the first to have thought of the word.

The term *'Shared Service'* is problematic too as it can mean different things to different people. I have heard it applied to a shared IT system, a shared management post and a traded service in the last month alone.

We must become used to unpacking what we mean and not being afraid to ask. It is better to confirm at the start than blowing something up because we did not take time to validate it.

3 - It sets up boundaries

Newspeak

Organisations create languages and if you are not well versed in them, you risk exclusion.

Take *Sustainability & Transformation Plans* (STP's). I think I am moderately intelligent, I have a background in adult social care and have worked with NHS colleagues for years. I understand the STP agenda, but am then confronted by diagrams like the one above, which is from a public facing document.

Taking organisational speak and dressing it up within a diagram does not work. And, presumably, the audience for this are members of the public not versed in STP speak.

How many will be able to understand how a planning process (that is so important for their local health provision) is being delivered?

Whether intentional or not, the beneficiaries of these programmes are therefore excluded by language.

Some things that work…

If Noam is correct, we are predisposed to language acquisition. We hoover up and regurgitate words (but perhaps do not always comprehend?). We also have an innate understanding of language which is shared.

Let's re-balance our natural abilities so that nurtured ones do not override our ability to communicate effectively:

1. Use a glossary - SSA's Tool T&V2.06 shows you how. Do it early in a collaborative activity and make it part of your project documentation.
2. Review that glossary - as you collaborate, things usually crystallise or change.
3. Don't be a tourist! - Stop being precious about words you have acquired in your career. If the project has a shared language you will avoid problems but you have to adapt rather than expect others to.
4. Do not rely on process maps or flowcharts - unless the language is understandable, they simply add complexity. SSA's Tool T&V2.05 is a good place to start.
5. Think about what 'people' would hear or see.

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