

LULLABY LANGUAGE

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People sometimes ask us for a list of "learnings from PSL." That's hard to do because PSL is so full of learnings, and the learnings are so individual. But there are patterns of PSL insights, and we're going to try to capture some of them to give a taste of what you might gain from a unique educational experience.

Perhaps the best part of such a list would be an accumulation of small things that add up to big results. Among the most common small learnings in PSL are learnings about language - a good example is what I call "lullaby language."

Lullaby language often comes up in PSL, but I don't want to take away any of the fun by revealing details of the simulations, so here's an example of lullaby language from one of my clients. Penny and Jeff were arguing over a key line in a requirements document:

The Catalog Department should deliver component pricing data by 1 February to the IT Department.

"There," said Penny, triumphantly. "There's my proof. We never promised to deliver that data that early."

"Yes you did," Jeff replied. "It's perfectly clear, right there. Should deliver by 1 February."

"Exactly," Penny countered. "It doesn't say we will, but only that we should. And we did try. But you computer people apparently don't appreciate the difficulty of getting every single one of those prices signed off by every person involved."

Well, I eventually got things cooled down, and we moved from blaming to problem-solving. The following are some excerpts from an on-the-spot workshop I created that was like the spontaneous sub-workshops that arise in PSL:

Should

I started the workshop with focus of their original problem, the nasty little word, "should." Jeff read the original statement as

The Catalog Department [must] deliver component pricing data by 1 February to the IT Department.

Penny, however, interpreted the "should" differently, as

The Catalog Department [will make every effort to] deliver component pricing data by 1 February to the IT Department.

What I taught them was a safer meaning, of "should" would be "probably won't," so the sentence reads,

The Catalog Department [probably won't] deliver component pricing data by 1 February to the IT Department.

"Oh," said Jeff, "if I'd realized that, we could have designed the project differently. Could Catalog have delivered parts of the pricing data by February 1?"

"Sure," said Penny. "We actually had about 90% of it by then, but that last 10% - mostly new items - took all the work."

"Ah. If only we'd known. We didn't need the entire table to proceed. Okay, next time we'll just let you know what we really need."

Just

Jeff had given me the perfect opening for the next lesson. "Sorry, Jeff," I said. That won't do."

"Why not?"

"Because you've managed to sneak in another one of those discounting words."

"What word?"

"Just." I went to the whiteboard and wrote what he said:

"Next time we'll just let you know what we really need."

"Now, what's the difference between that sentence and this one? I wrote:

"Next time we'll let you know what we really need."

"Well, it's the same thing, isn't it?"

Penny chimed in. "I get it. The 'just' makes it sound like there won't be any problems. It discounts the difficulty."

"Precisely. It's what I call a 'Lullaby Word.' Like 'should,' it lulls your mind into a false sense of security. A better translation of 'just' in Jeff's sentence would have been, 'have a lot of trouble to.'"

"I get it," Jeff said, coming to the board and snatching the marker from my hand. Then he wrote:

"Next time we'll [have a lot of trouble to] let you know what we really need."

"You know," he sighed, "I wish we'd had this little lesson last month. My second-best analyst up and quit on me, and I didn't see it coming. But a few weeks before, he told me, 'We haven't managed to hire another analyst yet, so I'm just working 80 hours a week until they do.' I should have heard him saying,

'We haven't managed to hire another analyst yet, so I'm [having a lot of trouble] working 80 hours a week until they do.'

He was trying to tell me that

he was overloaded, but the 'just' lulled me into discounting his message. And, because I didn't hear him, he finally quit. Darn!"

Soon

Penny looked thoughtful. "I know another

Lullaby word that got us into trouble."

"What's that?" Jeff asked.

"You remember when we didn't have the prices ready on February first, and you asked me when we would have them?"

"Sure, but I can't remember what your answer was."

"That's because it was a Lullaby. I said, 'Soon.' And what that means is..." She looked at me, and I nodded.

"I think it meant, 'I don't know, but don't keep bothering me.'"

"That's usually a pretty good translation," I confirmed.

Very

"Actually," Jeff chimed in, "what you said was 'very soon.'"

"Oh, great!" Penny said. "And what did that mean?"

"Adding 'very' is like adding a sleeping pill to the lullaby. It makes it even more certain that it's going to be a long, long time. Maybe never."

We spent a bit more time on the subject of lullaby words, with examples such as

Only: It's only a one line change. [That is, I didn't think much about what could go wrong.]

Anything: I didn't change anything. [That is, anything I thought was important.]

All: All I gotta do is ... [A synonym for "just."]

There are many more lullaby words, but in effect, all tend to discourage feedback by putting both the speaker's and the listener's minds to sleep.

And no feedback means that the

meaning of the state-

ment containing a lullaby word cannot be clarified. And, if it's not clarified, it can mean almost anything - and that's always the beginning of trouble. If you want to avoid such trouble, start converting lullaby words to alarm words - waking you up to potential misunderstanding, rather than lulling you to sleep. Just do it!

About the PSL Insider

The PSL Insider is published by Weinberg and Weinberg to share insights and to encourage attending our Problem Solving Leadership (PSL) workshop. For information about the workshop content,

schedule, cost, and location(s), see our website:

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SUCCESSFUL REENTRY

a letter from a PSL graduate to PSL instructor, Pat Snipp)

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Pat, I want to thank you and David (Schmaltz) for the fine job you did in facilitating our seminar. I can report that I have been able to approach problem solving in a more effective manner as a result of our "moving" experience that week.

Specifically, among other things, I am more sensitive of:

1. the ubiquitous and slippery nature of problems -- they are everywhere, not simply technical, and refreshingly solvable in many different ways;
2. the importance of solving the problem in the most positive environment from a human point of view;
3. the utility of airing people's points of views before leaping on a solution;
4. the value of being generous -- that is, giving the benefit of the doubt even when maybe it isn't warranted "on the surface." Being generous is like putting medicine on a wound.

I have found already how useful it is to maintain calm among thunderstorms of emotion, and to try to get different mind sets re-oriented in a common direction, rather than "go for the win" and gain a loser in your group. When you do this your interaction pays dividends much beyond the immediate moment because you are (hopefully) building good will toward the next problem to solve.

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