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BOOKS

Assessing the Parameters Of Issue-Driven Discourse

By **BARBARA WALLRAFF**
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Here's the kind of guff that we've all had about enough of (and if you've already had more than enough, feel free to skip ahead): "Technological innovation, globalization, complex regulation and increased accountability at the senior management and board level have all combined to significantly change the landscape of risk management today. To help address these issues, our security professionals deliver services to address the various elements of security and trust associated with communicating, transacting and accessing in this environment."

"Why Business People Speak Like Idiots" (Free Press, 175 pages, \$22) aims to put prose like that -- especially the spoken version of it -- out of its misery. Good idea.

The authors -- Brian Fugere, Chelsea Hardaway and Jon Warshawsky -- positioned themselves to write this book by developing software called Bullfighter in 2003, when all three worked at Deloitte Consulting. The computer program scoured business documents for snippets of unlovely jargon and suggested plain-English replacements. More of a gizmo than a killer app, Bullfighter was nonetheless a hit.

But business jargon, like a flu virus, keeps mutating. It's not enough to zap "bleeding edge," "frictionless," "results-driven" and other such words and phrases, one by one. The real goal is to avoid jargon instinctively, in the moment. Software can't help with this. To achieve the larger goal, you have to use your head. Another good idea.



Like a flu virus, business jargon mutates. Is there a way of zapping it decisively?

So, the book's argument goes, if you can avoid four "traps" -- being obscure, being anonymous, overpromising and being tedious -- you'll knock 'em dead. "Why Business People Speak Like Idiots" follows its own advice. It's blunt, lively and chockablock with personality.

A sidebar in the "Tedium Trap" section is headed: "And This Is Interesting Because?" A chapter title in the "Anonymity Trap" section reads: "Pick Up the Damn Phone." A brief, ironic discussion of "The Secret Magic Miracle Cure Answer" leads into the final, summing-up chapter, which promises: "There is an amazing opportunity for you to rise above your peers, further your career, sell your ideas, and get what you want just by being yourself."


Hmmm. Can we talk about that last claim? If only it were so easy. If only speaking like a brilliant person, or giving a presentation like one, were as easy as this book wants us to believe. One problem is that to follow the book's advice you have to be a certain kind of person, someone a lot like the authors themselves -- breezy, confident, quick on your feet and more prone to swearing than anyone in this newspaper is allowed to be. It also helps to be

enthusiastic about your subject.

But if you aren't naturally breezy, confident and enthusiastic, there doesn't seem to be much you can do about it. Referring to all of us, the authors observe: "On the weekend, we take off the corporate mask and speak in a real, compelling voice. And people listen." They suggest we follow such a course in the office as well. Is it possible, however, that the reason people listen to us on the weekend is that we're not talking about work?

Then, too, suppose you are breezy, confident, etc. Forgive me, but just having that personality style doesn't make you competent. The authors urge people to apologize when they fall short. Richard Clarke famously did, the authors note ("Your government failed you...and I failed you"), and so did Warren Buffett ("I was dead wrong"). We love these guys for such candor. But do we really want to hear heartfelt apologies from our boss, our colleagues, our assistants, our

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consultants, the IT department, the receptionist, the cleaning staff and the man who delivers lunch? Not me. I want them to have nothing much to apologize for because they do their jobs right.

Ultimately, "Why Business People Speak Like Idiots" has it backward. In my experience, the commonest problem with business language is that it tells you more about the speaker (or writer) than that person intended to share. People don't necessarily think things through or feel unconflicted enthusiasm for what they're working on. Not everyone has a personality with broad appeal. Not everyone knows what he's doing. A speaker's failure to convey his true essence is rarely the problem. More often the problem is the speaker's essence itself or else an uneasy relationship between that essence and the business at hand.

The problem with the "guff" at the start of this review, for instance, is that it's glib, fluffy and even dopey, no? ("To help address these issues, our security professionals deliver services to address the various elements of security...." Aw, c'mon!) As it happens, the example comes from the Web site of Deloitte Consulting, where two of the three authors still work.

I don't mean to beat them up for that; surely they themselves didn't write those sentences. My point is that many people to whom the adjectives glib, fluffy and dopey would apply -- at least at work -- are also successful workers and part of mainstream corporate culture. "Why Business People Speak Like Idiots" doesn't dispute this fact. It says, "Entire careers can be built on straight talk -- precisely because it is so rare." But that's what logicians call begging the question.

Fear that we'll be recognized for the highly imperfect beings we are, I submit, is our likeliest inducement to be better and think better -- and, as a result, speak better. If being yourself includes flinty-eyed self-scrutiny and a perfectionist streak, as well as breeziness, confidence, enthusiasm and all that -- well, then, this book is for you. In that case, though, I can't imagine you need it. No doubt you're already knocking 'em dead.

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