

Words matter when giving instructions

Having spent a majority of my career in jobs that required using concise language, I know better than most how important words are in effective communication. I will start with an amusing story. My daughter takes after my strong advocacy of concise language from very young and one day, her aunt told her to "put her shoes properly" to which my daughter replied "these are sandals, auntie, not shoes!" much to her aunt's annoyance. To many, sandals and shoes don't matter because they both go on our feet. But, as I am about to share, when we are indifferent to our choice of words, it could mean success or failure or even life or death.

Be logical and systematic

When it comes to writing work processes, I am fond of using the example of how to put an elephant, then a giraffe, into a refrigerator. Let's do this together, shall we?

First, the elephant.

Step 1: Open the refrigerator door.

Step 2: Stuff the elephant in.

Step 3: Close the refrigerator door.

That was simple, right? Now the giraffe.

Step 1: Open the refrigerator door.

Step 2: Remove the elephant.

Step 3: Fold the giraffe's neck and legs.

Step 4: Stuff the giraffe in.

Step 5: Close the refrigerator door.

How many of you did not consider taking the elephant out? How many of you did not think of folding the giraffe's neck and legs?

Concise means leaving no room for interpretation

Let's consider another example. I just completed a course at the Institute for Adult Learning, where, in a group of 4 participants per team, we were given these instructions for an exercise:

1. Using the 5 sheets of paper provided, make paper planes.
2. Each participant is to fly his plane over a given distance.
3. Each team must fly at least 3 planes over the distance to successfully complete the exercise.

Easy enough, right? But given these instructions, I would:

A. Fly all planes until I found one that succeeded to cover the distance.

B. Use that one same plane for all 3 attempts (because the instructions did not say the 3 planes must be different ones).

Good grammar versus clarity

Most times, if we get our grammar right, our instructions should be right too. But I now share an experience that showed it isn't always the case. One day several years ago, my company's HR department sent a memo to all managers saying they would need to wear a name tag at company events. They were told the name tag would bear "the name you wish to be called by", so someone named Josephine de Rozario might opt to have "Jo" on her name tag since that's how people addressed her. The instruction was, to me, grammatically correct. But every other manager in my department submitted their FULL NAME for the name tag, except me. I realised they had misunderstood the instructions when I heard them say "how silly of HR to ask us for our names when they have it on record!". So, perhaps the instructions might have been more effective if HR had given an example such as the one I made of Josephine de Rozario.

Mark of quality

All world-class quality management standards feature clarity of written processes as a key component to a productive and error-free workplace. Clarity becomes more critical when you're reading instructions in an emergency situation where someone's life is at stake. Will your instructions help someone do the right thing? So, the next time you need to develop or write instructions, make sure they are:

1. Logical and systematic (take the elephant out first!)
2. Not subject to interpretation (3 planes or 3 different planes?)
3. Clear by adding an example (Jo will do)