



“The single biggest problem in communications is the illusion that it has taken place.”

-George Bernard Shaw

I’m a communications professional, a storyteller and a grammar nerd. When I first read that quote from George Bernard Shaw, I was mystified. How could anyone think communication had taken place, if it hadn’t? So, I started studying communication lapses in organizations and how they happened.

It became clear to me that an awful lot of people were convinced that technology was communications, that **technology** was the **thing**. In the legal profession, it’s often referred to as *res ipsa loquitur* (Latin for "the thing speaks for itself").

You sent an email, therefore, you communicated. You texted, therefore, you communicated. Or, you held a meeting and talked at people for an hour. Absolutely nothing happened afterward, because nothing was actually communicated. So how, then, do we craft communications that do?

Perhaps the key is in this, from Sir Isaac Newton:

“Truth is ever to be found in simplicity, and not in the multiplicity and confusion of things.”

Effective communication should answer one question: “Why?”

Why are you sending that email? Why are you holding that meeting?

Here’s an example – you need to let your staff know about new sales incentives that take effect next month. Your email communication should start with a subject line that is clear, not cute or super creative. Just clear:

Subject: New Sales Incentives

The subject line is important for two reasons. One, it communicates exactly what’s in the email. Two, it’s easy to find later when the day’s other emails have buried it. A subject line like, “This is so cool!” might be cute, but it’s not especially helpful.

Then, deliver. Tell the staff what the incentives are and when, exactly, they take effect. You don’t need to set it up. Just tell them what they need to know.

One of the first lessons in journalism is to ask, then answer, the basic questions:

Who, what, when, where, why and how?

Our communications should provide answers to all of them, and I would add one more:

“What now?”

The recipients of your email or the people who attend your meeting should leave knowing what they’re supposed to do with the information you shared.

You can probably tell I’m a big believer in straight talk. Corporate speak and weird buzzwords are not communication. More to come on that – for now, just remember, “parking lot” is not a verb.