

DEFINING TERMS

It is easy for the professional man, particularly one in government service, to slip into a bad habit--the use of technical or professional jargon. A management engineer, for example, may be understood perfectly by other management engineers, but his talk of staff and line, motion study, and work flow charts may be misunderstood, or what is more dangerous, only half-understood by the man in the office three doors down the corridor.

Nor is that all of the difficulty. If some hardy soul dares ask the specialist to define his terms, the definition is likely to be as confusing and nearly as unintelligible as the word defined. How, then, can we improve our techniques for making our professional jargon understandable to the layman?

"What does this word mean?" To answer such a question most of us take the easy way out--we turn to the dictionary and read out of it a cold technical definition which, like as not, leaves confusion worse confounded but soothes our vanity and gives us the self-righteous feeling that we have done all that could be done under the circumstances. Stuff and nonsense! At best a dictionary definition is but a nucleus which must be developed, expanded, and supplemented until we have really answered the question, "What does it mean?" Use the dictionary if you must, but do not forget that you have not done the best possible job of definition if you stop with "Webster says..."

There are at least six special methods of definition that you can use to supplement the dictionary:

1. Quote an authority. In a sense the dictionary definition is definition by authority, but an explanation of a word or term as given by some recognized specialist in the particular field is helpful both in making clear the real meaning and in making that meaning impressive to the hearer.

2. Explain the origin of the word. For example, sabotage might be explained as coming from the French word meaning "wooden shoe," and one of its early meanings was to throw a wooden shoe into machinery to wreck it. ILLEGIB

3. Give an example. Take the idea or word to be defined and bring it down to a specific case. An example in science. [REDACTED]

4. Use comparison and contrast. A vivid and effective method of definition is to show how the thing defined resembles a thing with which we are already familiar. Or throw your notion of a term into sharp contrast with another term.

5. Try negation. To tell what a thing is not may serve to give a clearer understanding of it.

6. Use visual aids. Do not overlook the opportunity to use pictures, charts, and diagrams, or when possible, the object itself. In the dictionary a halberd is defined as "a kind of old-time long-handled weapon." Fortunately, there is a picture alongside.

Suggestions:

Introduction--not over 30-40 seconds. Open with a sentence or two that will snap us to attention.

Discussion--not over three minutes. Define your term at least three times, each time using one of the special methods of definition.

Conclusion--not over 20 seconds. Little more than a sentence or two to smooth up the end of the speech.

But don't tell us "Webster says...!"