

Common Cultures – Common Words

One of the privileges of working as a consultant with a wide range of clients across the public, private and voluntary sectors is that you get some great insights into how members of each of these sectors perceive themselves and perceive each other.

There is an immediate tendency for stereo-types. Charities will tend to believe that all their members of staff are vocationally driven and probably need less motivation and performance management than employees in the private sector. Public sector leaders will look askance at the (perceived) big salaries in the private sector and the reckless risk and reward cultures. And for their part private sector directors will point to the waste and inefficiency in the public sector and recount tales of bureaucracy and red tape that holds back their laudable plans to create jobs and prosperity.

And yet what strikes me most often is not the differences that exist between these sectors, but the similarities.

One common – if rather depressing - factor is the striking ability of organisations in all sectors to over-complicate things and to make mistakes.

I recently sat with a client in the private sector who was bemoaning the failings of the public sector and wondering why they couldn't operate more like the 'real world' of the private sector. And you can see the point. Doing business with the public sector can often be terribly slow. Decisions seem to be frequently deferred and the culture is often bureaucratic and risk adverse. It recently took me three months to commission some research work on behalf of a public sector client, having to initiate a detailed tender process with long timelines, detailed disclaimers and countless evaluation forms. A task I could probably have completed within a couple of weeks in the private sector using a lot less paper.

And yet to be fair, the private sector surely has to admit that it too can deliver some spectacular examples of failure. Witness the debacle at Northern Rock. It is instructive that the general reaction is to put the finger for this on the government and ask questions about their actions in clearing up the mess, rather than asking questions about the architects of the problem and holding them to account. Perhaps we just find it easier to blame the public sector!

Another common feature of both public and private sectors is the increasing use of acronyms, management speak and jargon. Again there does seem to be a lack of appreciation of just how common this trend is to both sectors. I have recently been working with private sector representatives in the development of a new set of strategies and agreements for the future development of Peterborough. A common complaint is just how difficult it is to come to terms

with the terminology involved in all this work. Acronyms abound and there seem to be such a multitude of organisations involved that it is very difficult to work out who is doing what and why!

Here again I think we have to recognise that we all use jargon and acronyms in our daily routine – whatever the sector. Many of my clients are in the financial services sector and the range of project names, management jargon and acronyms is just as bewildering as anything I encounter in the public sector.

I would in fact put in a strong plea for more tolerance of jargon. We use jargon and acronyms because it provides a neat short-hand for those in the know, avoiding constant repetition of long titles or phrases. We do this all the time in our everyday life too. The way we write text messages is a form of jargon – it suits us to use abbreviations and simpler ways of spelling words when we are in a rush to send a short message. The key thing is to recognise that not everyone is familiar with the jargon we use within our own environments and to think about how we use it when we are talking to external audiences.

And that plea for more understanding and tolerance extends not just to jargon but to those working in the various sectors of our society and economy. From where I sit it is pretty clear that whether we work in the public, private or voluntary sectors we have more in common, than we sometimes like to believe.

Richard Astle is Director of Athene Communications, a Peterborough based consultancy specialising in change and project communications.