

Semantics - you know what I mean (05/20/09)

Have you ever heard someone brush off an argument by saying: “*Oh, that’s just a matter of semantics!*” One meaning can be expressed by different words and one word can have multiple connotations and people seem to prefer one interpretation over another. For example, I interviewed with the CEO of a service organization who told me he needed my assistance in replacing some outdated data-bases. In fact, he had signed a contract for implementing an Enterprise Resource Planning (ERP) system. If you are leading an organization, your success depends on how well people understand what you expect of them. As a service provider it is my obligation to be absolutely clear about what I commit myself to doing.

Here are some words with specific meanings that I have seen used rather casually.

- **Results and Success.**

Your action will be met with a re-action. That reaction is a result. If that result is intended and wanted, you are successful. On the other hand, if that same result is unintended and unwanted, you have failed. You see, success and failure are two sides of the same coin and you will obtain results regardless of your intentions or preferences. Next time when someone tells you (s)he is results oriented ask for clarification.

- **Event, Problem, Change, Symptom and Root-cause.**

When nothing happens, everything remains the same, that’s what we call uneventful. An event is thus a trigger for change. However, the question is whether that event has any effect on us? Events can be either local or systemic; they can cause change for one, some or everyone. Events move you from an old situation into a new one. When this happens, you experience a symptom or the effect; e.g. you experience an increase in the cost of doing business (symptom or effect) due to rising energy prices (event). The problem is an eroding profit margin; the difference between the current margin and the forecast. Notice that this implies that a problem can be accurately measured. Here is the kicker - the root cause of the problem is not the rising energy cost (symptom) but the level of your exposure to energy prices! Ah, I can hear you say that’s just semantics but it’s not. Calling things by their proper names helps you getting people on the same page in finding opportunities for possible answers to your declining profit margin. Instead of being a victim of rising expenses you can take responsibility for reducing your energy exposure. That’ll put you right back in the driver’s seat!

Managing expectations requires eliminating possible sources of misunderstandings. Therefore, it pays to write a glossary of terms for even the simplest of terms such as the ones explained in this article. Good luck!