ForeWord Reviews

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Talk Normal: Stop the Business Speak, Jargon and Waffle
Tim Phillips
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"Memo to office bores, puffed-up marketers and blokes who rock on the balls of their feet while jiggling the change in their pocket: say what you mean. Your jargon phrases, weasel words and waffle are doing our heads in." This is the advice Phillips first offered in his blog, talknormal.co.uk, and is now bringing to a wider audience with this book. After twenty years of frustration as a journalist wading through business speak, he is ready to lead a revolution in the way people communicate.

A freelance journalist and author of *Knockoff: The Deadly Trade in Counterfeit Goods*, Phillips shows how the use of confusing language causes problems at work, in the media, and in politics, and offers advice on being better understood and, therefore, more successful. His research into the overuse of jargon such as "added-value," "low hanging fruit" and "operationalization" shows a strong surge in the employment of such speech in the last decade. The result, he contends, is conference calls during which participants routinely lose interest in the conversation and mute their phones to tidy their desks, Power Point presentations that induce glassy-eyed stares rather than understanding, and hours wasted in meetings where nothing is actually achieved or resolved.

One of the many examples shared in the book is from a corporate press release: "Capitalising on its 42 year history of delivering meaningful operational improvements and measurable total cost of ownership reductions to an impressive list of financial service customers…" It goes on to describe "significant" and "substantial" performance improvements, but what it doesn't do, Phillips points out, is quantify anything. It is near impossible from this writing to understand what this company does, much less how well it actually does it. His advice to those stuck in the cycle of endless jargon: talk with precision about real life, not concepts. Instead of using words like "significant," give the actual number or percentage.

Phillips uses humor to deliver his message: "Reading a pile of press releases is like being licked by a needy, slightly smelly dog." And his insights and advice are right on. Though the first chapter starts to feel a bit like a textbook (with nearly two dozen graphs illustrating the rise

of business jargon), and American readers may need to look up some of the British pop-culture references, the book is well worth reading to the end—and then advisable to leave it on the executive conference room table.

Christine Canfield