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Oregon Trails

BUZZWORD BINGO AND NEWSPEAK SYNDROME

by **Tom Leonhardt** (Director of the Library, Oregon Institute of Technology)
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Recently a friend introduced me to **Buzzword Bingo**. The rules are simple: For those of you who attend a lot of meet-

ings, this should make those meetings go faster! If you don't attend lots of meetings, consider yourself lucky. How to play: Simply tick off 5 words heard in one meeting from the following list and shout out BINGO! It's that easy!

Synergy	Gap Analysis	Bandwidth	Movers and Shakers	Knowledge Base
Proactive, not Reactive	Best Practice	Hardball	Ball Park	Total Quality
Win-Win Situation	The Bottom Line	In the Loop	Fast Track	Mindset
Think Outside the Box	Core Business	Out of the Loop	Result-Driven	Put The One to Bed
Take That Offline	Lessons Learned	Go the Extra Mile	A Done Deal	Quality-Driven
On the Same Page	Touch Base	Benchmark	Empower Employees	Move the Goal Posts
Client-Focused	Revisit	The Big Picture	No Blame	Peel the Onion Back
Strategic Fit	Game Plan	Value-Added	Stretch the Envelope	

Testimonials from other players: "I had only been in the meeting for five minutes when I yelled BINGO."

"My attention span at meetings has improved dramatically."

"The facilitator was gobsmacked as we all screamed BINGO for the 3rd time."

"I feel that the game has enhanced the overall quality of meetings per se on a quid pro quo basis."

"People are even listening to mumblers, thanks to **Buzzword Bingo!**"

Why is this game funny? Why is this game sad? Are you contributing in the wrong way to this game? When in charge of a meeting do several people yell **Bingo** before you even finish your opening remarks? If so, then you might have **Newspeak Syndrome**. Its onset can come from too many meetings, too many memoranda, and increasing pressure to respond to the latest management fad or the emergency of the day. Is there a greater tendency for you to take refuge in cliches, buzzwords, euphemisms? Are you hiding more than you are revealing in your comments, your memoranda? Are you mixing metaphors that you have made up yourself with words you picked up on "Meet the Press" and "Monday Night Football?" If you answer "yes" to any of these questions, you may be suffering (and causing others to suffer) from **Newspeak Syndrome**. Isn't it possible to say what you mean in clear, concise English? Can't you be understood without being blunt, offensive, and equivocating? Of course you can and as your reward, you can play and enjoy **Buzzword Bingo** with a clear conscience. But who can you play the game with and enjoy it with impunity?

Buzzword Bingo is best played in a group of peers with a sense of humor, or, if you are in charge of a group and want to be kept honest, you can develop your own list of words and let your subordinates play against you. That is, you play against them and they play against you. You use their words in your quest for Bingo and they use yours.

Prizes? I suggest that the winners don't yield a Bingo and a job well done is reward enough. The game itself got me to thinking, first about the richness of the English language and why we have to resort to cliches, buzzwords, euphemisms, "Newspeak," and even silence. Is the sin against

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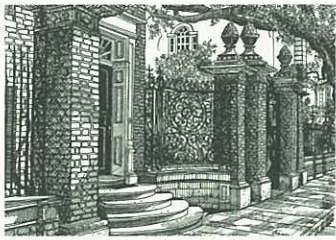
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language more egregious the more education one has? For example, is it (should it be) more forgivable for a sports announcer saying that a player has "impactfulness" than for an academic librarian to suggest that a new strategy will "impact" morale or productivity? Having just had oral surgery to remove a wisdom tooth that was deeply embedded in my jaw and no longer under the influence of pain medication, I can't help but wonder how painful it would be to remove that impacted strategy from wherever it ended up. Years ago I used to see an ad, I think it was in *The Saturday Review*, for a desk ornament that said, "Eschew obfuscation." I regret not ordering one. Imagine the fun I could have had explaining it to people who did not see the humor in it or even understand the literal meaning. "Well", I would say, "it means to avoid confusion."

"Then why don't you just say what you mean?"

The very phrase, eschew obfuscation, points to the richness of the English language and its preciseness, too. There really is no excuse for resorting to sloppy language as a substitute for thought just because we have taken on more responsibility, have to attend more meetings, and have to produce more memoranda. And it is no more defensible to abuse the language in order to avoid a truthful response or in order to cloud our meaning (because we don't know what we mean?) than to simply avoid having to think. **Buzzword Bingo** is probably not going to cure a serious case of **Newspeak Syndrome**, but there is a cure and there is a vaccination, although neither is 100% effective. The earlier the vaccination, the greater the chance that one will not be stricken with "Newspeak Syndrome." The earlier one is afflicted, the less chance there is for cure. The first step

towards a cure is recognition that one is, indeed, afflicted, and therein lies the rub. The more advanced the disease is, the less likely it is that the patient will recognize the symptoms, and, sadly, the less likely that the patient can be cured.

Learning to read a text closely, learning to write well, learning to be one's own editor, in speech and in writing, reading good writing are all ways to be inoculated against "Newspeak Syndrome." Booster shots to keep oneself free from this disease include listening to political commentators, politicians, and sports announcers and trying to understand what they said, trying to understand how they avoided saying anything of substance at all, or trying to understand how they avoided answering any questions at all. And finally, the booster shot that amuses and edifies, **Buzzword Bingo**. But before you play, be sure to add your own pet words and phrases that offend your ear. And above all, eschew obfuscation! 🌱