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Why perfect English is not enough in the boardroom

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By Janice Haywood, founder of Business Learning Solutions

For years, the assumption in most companies has been simple. If someone speaks English well, they will know how to communicate well in English. Fix the language and communication takes care of itself.

According to Janice Haywood, founder of Business Learning Solutions, who has spent three decades training and coaching executives and managers across Europe, the opposite is true, and nowhere is this more evident than at the highest levels of an organisation. By the time someone reaches an executive role, their level of English has little bearing on whether their message actually gets through.

The paradox

Junior employees are forgiven for unpolished English. A hesitant sentence, an unusual expression, a grammatical mistake: nobody minds in the early years of a career. But as soon as someone reaches management or committee level, expectations in the room change completely. Nobody is listening for grammatical accuracy anymore. They are listening for authority, clarity and judgement. And that is precisely where fluent English speakers begin to stumble, because fluency and executive communication are two different skills, and only one of them is taught in a language class.

This comes up in two opposite ways among the senior professionals Janice Haywood coaches, and both are more common than people think.

When directness comes across as unpolished

One example is a chief operating officer at a large fintech company. He speaks strong, confident English and consistently receives very positive internal feedback for being direct and honest. But he began coaching because he wanted his communication style to match his role. In meetings, he expressed disagreement by simply saying "I disagree". It was grammatically perfect and perfectly understandable, but it sounded abrupt in rooms where his more senior colleagues framed the same disagreement as "what concerns me about this proposal is...". Same message, same level of English, very different impression. The work involved learning to structure an idea and soften how he presented it, without losing the honesty that made him effective in the first place.

When sophistication works against you

The opposite problem arose with a senior specialist at an energy company, who gave regular updates to his board. His English was excellent, perhaps too excellent. He relied on sophisticated vocabulary and complex sentence structures, assuming that was how communication at board level should sound. The result was the opposite of what he intended. His technical points got lost, and the board struggled to follow the data he presented. When he learned to simplify, using shorter sentences, simpler technical explanations and a more direct presentation of the figures that really mattered to the board, his presentations were transformed. The change came from clarity.

Two ways to fail, one underlying cause

Neither of these professionals had a language problem. One said too little, coming across as too abrupt and unstructured for a senior audience. The other said too much, speaking in a way that was too dense and sophisticated for people to follow. Both communication styles are common at senior levels, and both are mistaken for problems with English proficiency when they are really communication problems that fluency can disguise for years, until they finally come to light in front of a board.

What this means for companies investing in training

Companies setting their budgets for English or communication skills training for 2027 would do well to pause and think about this. The executives who most need support are not usually those with the weakest English. They are the ones whose English is already good enough that nobody has stopped to consider whether their actual communication—its structure, tone and clarity, and their ability to read the room—is doing its job. Fluency opens the meeting room door. A different skill determines whether someone is listened to once inside.

About Business Learning Solutions

Business Learning Solutions (BLS) is a training and coaching consultancy based in Madrid, specialising in communication, management and interpersonal skills for professionals who work in English as a second language. BLS works with companies including Electronic Arts, Siemens and Philip Morris in Spain and across Europe.

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