

INNOVATION-TRIZ NEWSLETTER: MARCH 2007

THE VERIZON JARGON TOUR

You've heard it before and its time to hear it again. Everyone thinks their problem is special and unique. In addition, we use special corporate or industry jargon to describe the area we are working in, reinforcing that uniqueness. When you're talking with someone in the same company or maybe at a specialized industry meeting, that helps in communication. Acronyms instead of phrases. Unique words that instantly communicate an image or area of concern. In TRIZ, we talk about generic functions. What does the product or system do and we use the language of a tenth grader and no higher. The famous illustration of this is the Russian and American astronauts getting together for the first time and discussing the great challenge of getting ink to flow in zero gravity so as to be able to record data in space. If you define the problem as making ink flow, your brain goes off in a very expensive (microgravity pump) direction. If you say the function is to record data, you might use a pencil (which is what the Russians did).

On a recent Saturday morning tour of a local Verizon fiber optic cable training center in Tampa, the acronyms flew faster than it was possible to write them down on the few business cards on hand! A certain amount of embarrassment crept in after asking for the tenth time, "What does that mean?" There was always a chagrined response and a patient explanation for the non-fiber optic cable wizards. This use of jargon is the contradiction--it makes communication easy to those in the know, but it is a HUGE barrier to problem solving because it makes us think our problem is unique and special. Some of you remember our other examples of "defalcation" and "elephant account" from our workshops.

Here's just a few of the Verizon tour jargon:

1. FDH ("fiber distribution hub")
2. PSTN ("public switch telephone net")
3. Data "pipe"
4. PON ("passive optical net")
5. WDM ("wave duplex multiplex")
6. APC ("angle position communicator")

Now the point here is not to make fun of Verizon. EVERY company and industry has these, but the exercise you need to do is to make a simple two column chart of all the jargon and acronyms YOU use and write beside them a phrase you would use to describe it to a ten year old. That should also be the Google search term you use to get out of your box. Try it out for your self--Type in "defalcation" and "fraud" into a search box and see the difference. Now do the same for your terms and problems.

Look at the first acronym above. It's a place where things come together and go back out. It's NOT a fiber distribution hub EXCEPT in the case of a fiber optic cable distribution network. Where ELSE do people combine and redistribute things? What other technical systems do this? How do they do it? When you figure out what your generic descriptors are, use them to not only broaden your web search, but also to look at meeting and publications you should be reading and visiting occasionally. If you've got some good examples of what we're talking about, EM them to us and we'll publish in a future newsletter.

When you're communicating to the engineering associate in the office next door about an immediate short term problem, go ahead and use the jargon. But when you need some innovative ideas, STOP and think about the FUNCTION you are performing and describe it in the most generic way that you can.