

hatchproof

Lost in Translation:

How Bureaucracy Broke the Way
We Talk to Each Other
(and How We Can Fix It)



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the corporate speak problem



1 Elon Musk Hates Your Acronym

Say what you will about Elon Musk — and there's a lot to say — but one thing is clear: the man has declared war on corporate speak.

In a [now-famous email](#) to Tesla employees, Musk wrote:

“
Excessive use of acronyms is a significant impediment to communication. No one can actually remember all these acronyms, and people don't want to seem dumb in a meeting, so they just sit there in ignorance.

His directive? Ban them. Unless everyone knows what an acronym means, don't use it. Don't pretend. Don't perform. **Just say what you mean.**

Musk's message wasn't about style — it was about speed. In his world, where timelines are compressed and stakes are high, unclear communication is a hidden tax. It slows teams down, muddles accountability, and multiplies error. And what he's pointing to — however brashly — is something behavioral science and psychology has known for years: bureaucratic language isn't just annoying. **It's dangerous.**

2 The Irony of Language: Built for Clarity, Now Weaponized for Confusion

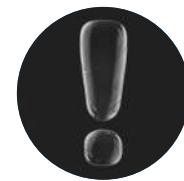
Language evolved to help humans coordinate, cooperate, and build trust. Among close-knit groups, we develop shared shorthand — inside jokes, unfinished sentences, glances that say everything.

Why does that work? Because of common ground — the [shared mental context](#) that allows us to communicate efficiently. When everyone's in on it, shortcuts help. When they're not, they confuse. Organizations often forget this. They treat jargon, acronyms, and abstract language as if it's inherently efficient or a sign of inside knowledge and capability. But once teams

grow past a certain size, those linguistic shortcuts stop working and they become organizational blocks.

This is one of the paradoxes of organizational scale: the very language meant to streamline operations ends up slowing them down. Instead of aligning teams, it fragments them. Instead of reinforcing trust, it erodes it.

3 Sound Smart, Say Nothing



Sometimes, the confusion is accidental. Other times, it's self-serving.

Cognitive scientist Steven Pinker calls it the [Curse of Knowledge](#) — the tendency to assume others know what we know, leading us to speak in ways that are inaccessible or overly complex.

In corporate settings, this combines with another behavioral tendency: the desire to sound intelligent, competent, and in control. The result is euphemisms, acronym salads, and meaningless performance speak.

“We’re right-sizing our resource allocation to optimize stakeholder outcomes.”

Translation: We’re laying people off.



This tendency isn’t new. One of the most memorable critiques came from Ernest Hemingway, after fellow author William Faulkner accused him of writing too plainly. Faulkner said,

“He has never been known to use a word that might send the reader to the dictionary.”

Hemingway’s reply?

“Poor Faulkner. Does he really think big emotions come from big words? He thinks I don’t know the ten-dollar words. I know them all right. But there are older and simpler and better words, and those are the ones I use.”

The point is timeless: clarity is not dumbing down. Clarity is discipline. In organizations, it’s also survival and competitive differentiation. Because when understanding breaks down, so does execution.

4 Lost in Translation: The Hidden Cost of Miscommunication

When communication breaks down, it's not just annoying. It's expensive.

[One survey](#) of 400 companies with 100,000 employees each cited an average loss per company of \$62.4 million per year because of inadequate communication to and between employees. And that's just the visible part. The deeper cost is in missed decisions, eroded trust, and fractured alignment.



Language isn't just how we share information. It's how we signal intent, build rapport, and coordinate action. When teams rely on ambiguous or exclusionary language, the results are delays, distrust, and disengagement.

Psychologically, the reason is straightforward. Humans are acutely sensitive to mismatch — especially [when a leader says one thing](#) and does another. We don't need a formal violation to feel something's off. We register it intuitively. That feeling of "wait, didn't they just say the opposite last week?" is a type of observed cognitive dissonance. And in organizations, that kind of contradiction doesn't just break clarity — it breaks trust

Worse, overuse of jargon creates insider—outsider dynamics. Language is one of our most [powerful social tools](#) — it's how we signal belonging, build shared meaning, and create cohesion in groups. But when misused, it does the opposite. It breeds fracture. What starts as shorthand becomes exclusionary. What's meant to streamline communication turns into a gatekeeping mechanism. And when you stack that across departments, hierarchies, and functions, you don't get cohesion — you get drift.

People stop speaking the same language, both figuratively and literally.

Collaboration suffers, trust weakens, and eventually, you're not one team anymore — you're a collection of fiefdoms, each with its own vocabulary, assumptions, and internal logic. The risk is that language doesn't serve its original purpose of shared understanding; it stops creating connection and starts creating division.

Case Study: NASA's Challenger Disaster

When the Challenger shuttle exploded 73 seconds after launch in 1986, killing all seven crew members, the root cause wasn't just engineering failure. It was linguistic.

Engineers at Morton Thiokol had flagged serious concerns about the O-ring seals under cold conditions. But as those warnings moved up the chain, the language changed. Urgency softened. The signal got buried under layers of abstraction, qualification, and managerial filtering.

It was later concluded that NASA suffered from "flawed decision-making" rooted in communication breakdowns and euphemistic language. Sociologist Diane Vaughan described it as "the normalization of deviance" — where risk signals were present, but blunted by process and bureaucratic politeness.

The Challenger disaster wasn't a failure of intelligence, process, or even data. It was a failure of meaning, a breakdown in how information was conveyed, interpreted, and acted upon. And that breakdown wasn't accidental. It was baked into the culture, the language, and the structure of communication itself.

To understand how to fix that, we have to go deeper — into the psychology of clarity, and why the way we speak inside organizations either fuels alignment or erodes it from the inside out.





the psychology of communication



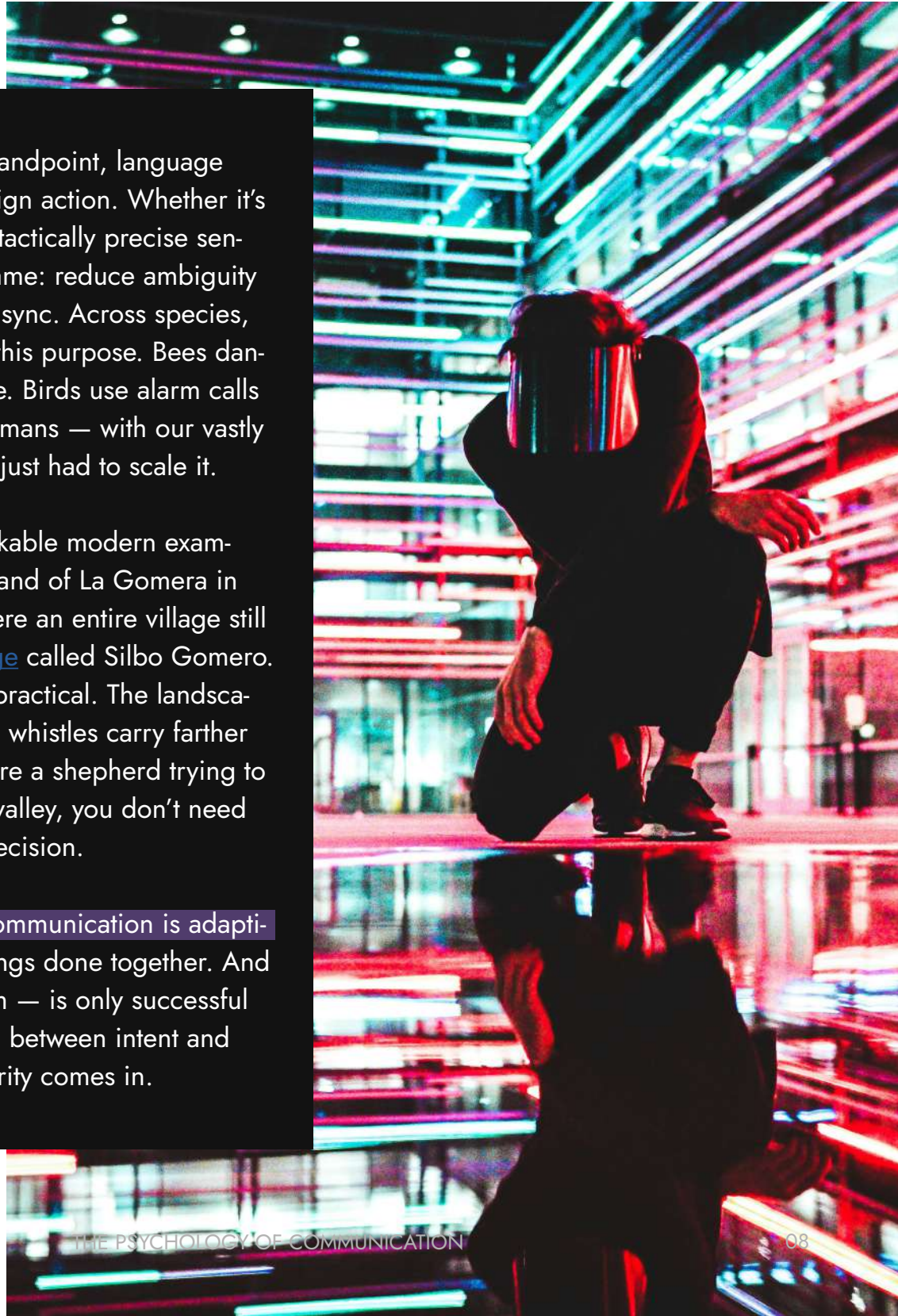
1 Why We Speak at All

Before we talk about clarity, jargon, or AI-enhanced dialogue systems, it's worth asking a more basic question: Why do we communicate at all? What is language — not in its poetic or academic sense, but in its most stripped-down, biological function? It's not self-expression. It's not storytelling. It's coordination.

From an evolutionary standpoint, language emerged as a tool to align action. Whether it's a grunt, gesture, or syntactically precise sentence, the goal is the same: reduce ambiguity so that we can move in sync. Across species, communication serves this purpose. Bees dance. Dolphins echolocate. Birds use alarm calls to coordinate flight. Humans — with our vastly larger social groups — just had to scale it.

One of the more remarkable modern examples comes from the island of La Gomera in the Canary Islands, where an entire village still uses a [whistled language](#) called Silbo Gomero. It's not ornamental. It's practical. The landscape is mountainous, and whistles carry farther than shouts. When you're a shepherd trying to communicate across a valley, you don't need nuance — you need precision.

The lesson is simple: **communication is adaptive**. We speak to get things done together. And language — in any form — is only successful when it reduces friction between intent and action. That's where clarity comes in.

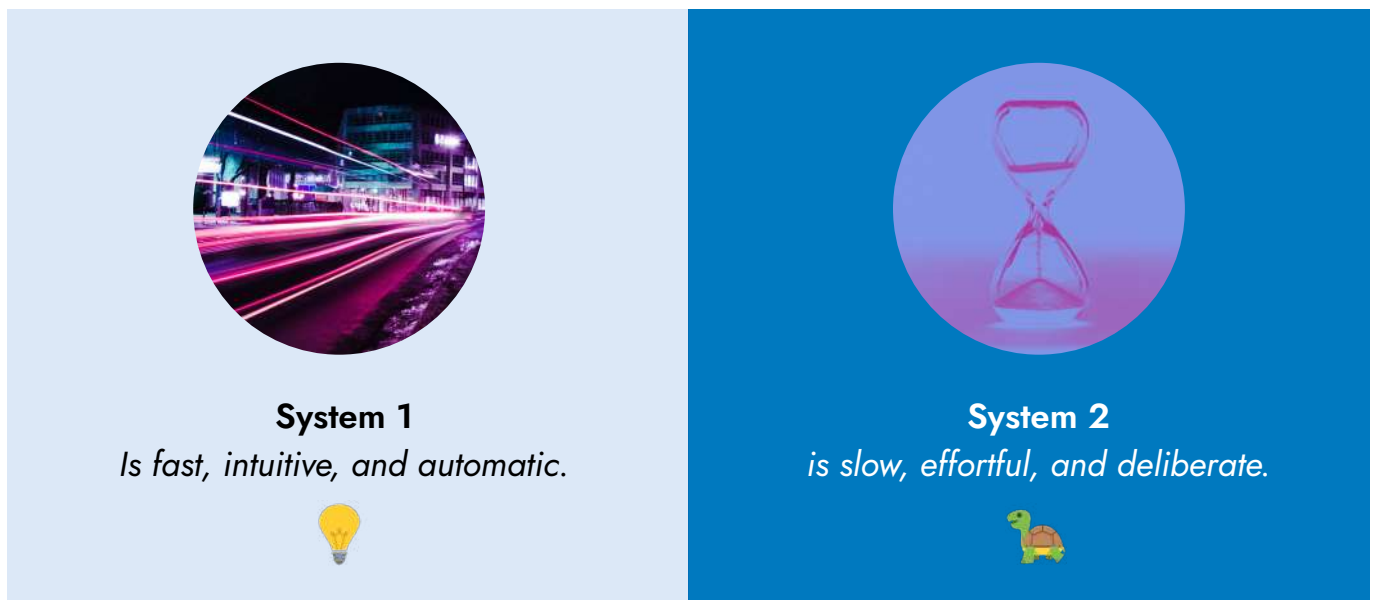


2 Clarity as Cognitive Relief

Humans are cognitive misers. We avoid mental effort not because we're lazy, but because evolution taught us to conserve energy wherever possible. The brain is metabolically expensive. So when something is easy to understand — when language is fluent, structured, and familiar — it feels good.

Psychologists call this processing fluency, and it shapes everything from our judgments of truth to our perception of credibility. When something is easy to process, we're more likely to believe it's true (Reber & Schwarz, 1999). When it's hard, we feel friction — and that friction sends a subtle signal: something's off.

This ties directly into Daniel Kahneman's System 1 and System 2 thinking.



Clear communication activates System 1. Bureaucratic sludge? That pulls us into System 2 — draining energy, delaying action, and often derailing the conversation altogether.

In the context of work, this becomes a silent killer of momentum. Every time someone reads an email three times trying to decode its meaning, that's a cognitive tax.

Every time they hesitate to respond because the jargon has them second-guessing their understanding, that's a moment of lost alignment. And those moments add up — across teams, across functions, across entire organizations.

Clarity isn't just nice. It's neurologically efficient.

3 Language as Safety and Trust

But clarity isn't only about cognitive ease. It's about emotional safety. In high-performing teams, people feel free to speak up, challenge ideas, and admit mistakes — a condition known as psychological safety (Edmondson, 1999). And one of the fastest ways to destroy that safety is through unclear or inconsistent communication.

Ambiguous language creates interpretive risk. When I don't know what you really mean — when I have to guess or read between the lines — I hesitate. And that hesitation ripples outward: fewer questions, fewer challenges, fewer contributions. Uncertainty replaces momentum.

This is where language becomes more than just a medium. It becomes the glue that binds a team's shared mental models — the

binds a team's shared mental models — the internal maps we carry about how work gets done, who owns what, and what good looks like. In well-functioning teams, those maps are aligned. In dysfunctional ones, they're not even close.

Organizational theorist Karl Weick described teams as sensemaking units — small social systems that interpret, adapt, and act in the face of ambiguity. But that sensemaking only works when the language is there to support it. Not just the words, but the tone, the timing, the shared context. It's not enough to speak. People have to feel understood.

When they do, something powerful happens. Trust accelerates. Decisions speed up. And people stop managing impressions and start managing the work.

4 What Comes After Words

Language has always evolved to match the complexity of our coordination needs. From grunts to grammar, whistles to emojis, each iteration solved a problem of its time. And if we zoom out, today's communication tools — Slack, Zoom, email, decks — may eventually look as rudimentary as smoke signals.

There's already speculation that in the not-so-distant future, we might bypass verbalization altogether. Brain-to-brain communication, once the realm of science fiction, is now under active research — from [neural decoding](#)

to direct brain interfaces like those being explored by [Neuralink](#). The promise is simple: strip away the messy middle step of translating thought into language, and transmit intent directly.

It's still early. But it's a useful provocation. It reminds us what communication is ultimately for: shared understanding. Everything else — the tone, the structure, the medium — is negotiable. In that light, jargon isn't just annoying. It's an evolutionary regression of our species and a psychological inefficiency.



**AI's role
in making
us
communicate
better**



1 The New Fire

Every era has its breakthrough — a force that rewires how we coordinate, collaborate, and connect. Spoken language did it first. Then writing. Then symbols. Then print. Then screens. And now, algorithms.

If you zoom out far enough, the pattern is clear: humanity keeps inventing tools to make communication easier. Not necessarily prettier or more verbose, but more efficient, more scalable, and more collaborative.

The printing press wasn't about aesthetics. It was about access. The alphabet wasn't about poetry. It was about permanence. Morse code, telegraphs, email, messaging, every major communication technology has solved one fundamental problem: how do we reduce friction between intent and understanding?

AI is no different. Or at least, it shouldn't be. At its best, AI sits in this same lineage. *It's a tool for removing communication friction* especially at scale.

But to understand how it does that, you have to stop thinking about it as raw computation — and start thinking about it as an amplifier of meaning.



2 Language and Meaning

The real power of today's large language models isn't in their speed, scale, or syntax. It's in what they surface — the hidden psychology encoded in the way we use words.

The secret advantage of LLMs isn't compute, rather it's empathy and understanding. When trained on trillions of human words, models start to pick up patterns we didn't even know we were broadcasting: how we reveal stress, hint at uncertainty, express doubt, hedge our confidence, betray our values. Every sentence we write says something about what we're thinking — and what we're about to do next.

This is why language is the richest behavioral dataset on the planet. It's filled with micro-signals of emotion, intention, belief, and motivation. The models that learn to read that subtext — not just parse words — are the ones beginning to act less like machines and more like collaborators. They're the beginning of what we at Hatchproof call *Behavioral AI*. It's not a tool that replaces human communication, but one that helps us understand it, sharpen it, and bring the human back into the communication fold. It's not about writing faster. It's about meaning more.

3 Fighting Back Against Corporate Speak

And this is where AI's role can become our best friend in fighting back against corporate jargon and failed communication. In the modern workplace, most people aren't asking AI to solve quantum physics. They're asking it to fix their emails, rewrite their team updates, explain a product decision to a customer without sounding like a robot or a lawyer, and translate their idea from "I kind of know what I mean" into "Here's what I'm really trying to say."

In other words: people are already using AI to fight back against the very communication bloat that bureaucracy created.

Copywriting tools are replacing buzzwords with punchlines. Slide builders are stripping out the jargon. Customer support bots are becoming tone-aware. Managers are using prompts like "make this sound like me, but clearer" — not because they're lazy, but because they're tired of sounding like policy manuals.

Whether it's summarizing a 10-page strategy doc in a single paragraph, rephrasing legalese into plain English, or drafting team retros with both honesty and warmth, AI is increasingly the mechanism by which people are undoing the communication mess they inherited.

The tools that win aren't the ones that say more. They're the ones that help us say the right thing, in the right tone, to the right person, done at scale.



4 Case Study: Microsoft and Copilot

No company has gone deeper into this than Microsoft — and no product better embodies the potential than Microsoft 365 Copilot.

Launched in early 2023, Copilot is embedded directly into tools like Word, Outlook, and Teams. Its promise isn't novelty. It's relief. It helps people write better emails, prep smarter docs, and extract meaning from meetings — in seconds. And critically, it's built not to replace work, but to rewrite the language layer that sits across all work.

In early usage trials, [Microsoft reported](#) a significant reduction in what they called “task friction” — the time and effort spent on communication-heavy tasks like writing updates, digesting long threads, or preparing presentations. Users said Copilot made them feel “more articulate,” “more prepared,” and even “more confident”, not because it gave them words, but because it helped them find their words.

In a world full of communication and messaging noise, Copilot helps make people sound more like themselves — and less like the org chart. And in doing so, it's slowly resetting the standard for how workplace communication should feel: simple, clear, and maybe even human.



AI at work



1 Meetings: Where Clarity Goes to Die

It's no secret that meetings have become the modern workplace's most despised ritual. The average number of meetings per employee has risen dramatically in the last decade, [particularly in hybrid and remote settings](#). And the problem isn't just the time. It's the aftermath — the ambiguity, misalignment, and missed opportunity that follows once everyone clicks "Leave."

Meetings are noisy. Multiple voices, conflicting priorities, competing incentives. People hedge. They signal without saying. They contradict themselves, often unintentionally. And in the absence of structure, most of what's said evaporates the moment the call ends.

Psychology has long confirmed what most of us already know: [human memory is terrible](#). It's reconstructive, not reproductive. We don't remember what was said — we remember how we felt about it. We remember selectively, and often inaccurately, colored by bias, rank, and emotion.



This is where AI steps in — not just to transcribe or summarize, but to make sense of what happened. Smart meeting tools are beginning to track language shifts over time, pick up when someone reverses course, spot inconsistencies in decision logic, and help teams detect misalignment before it turns into wasted effort. They're not replacing minutes, they're revealing the meaning behind them. And for leaders juggling dozens of these conversations weekly, that kind of context recall isn't just convenient. It's essential.

Performance and and Reviews: The Memory Problem in Management

If you're a manager responsible for five, seven, ten people, and you're trying to track each person's contributions, growth, challenges, and goals across a quarter, you're not managing. You're guessing.

Without AI, performance systems are held together by sticky notes, memory scraps, and [recency bias](#). Managers tend to overweight the last thing someone did. They [forget the nuance](#) of early wins.

They miss patterns. And they're often surprised by their own evaluations, because so much of it is retroactive. Employees feel this. They sense when the feedback is thin or generic. They know when a check-in is more about the form than the function.

AI offers a different path. It can observe interactions in real time, log meaningful contributions, surface consistent behaviors (or behavior shifts), and build a richer, fairer picture of performance. It can prompt managers to recognize progress when it happens — not three months later. And it can help employees stay focused on the goals they've set, nudging them toward follow-through when motivation dips or priorities drift.

Performance, when rooted in memory alone, is fragile. With the right tools, it can become cumulative and something that builds towards personal development rather than hinder it.

3 Learning and Growth: Less Jargon, More Signal

Corporate learning has become a language game. “Upskilling.” “Capability frameworks.” “Personalized learning journeys.” The jargon is endless and often meaningless.

Meanwhile, L&D teams are stuck trying to design experiences that tick boxes, stay on budget, and somehow still move the needle in contributing to the bottom line. They know engagement is low, and they know most of the training that gets delivered [ends up forgotten or ignored](#).

AI doesn’t magically solve this, but it does offer something L&D has been chasing for years: responsiveness. It can observe what people are actually struggling with, not just what a competency map says they should be learning. It can generate just-in-time resources. It can tailor content to tone, style, and context. And it can cut through the euphemistic sludge of most training materials to produce language that people actually understand and want to engage with.

Most importantly, AI can support the kind of learning that improves communication itself, whether that’s better writing, clearer presentation, more thoughtful feedback, or improved listening. In a world where everything is communication, L&D that reinforces understanding instead of performance theatre is a massive unlock..





Emotional Intelligence: The Signals Beneath the Words

Even in small teams, even in tight relationships, we're often guessing at how the other person is feeling. We look for signs, we infer, we project. And more often than not, [we get it wrong](#).

This uncertainty is [especially high in distributed teams](#), where tone is flattened and facial cues disappear. We assume silence means disengagement, or that brevity signals annoyance. We worry someone is upset when they're just tired. Or worse, we miss distress signals completely because they're hidden behind work-appropriate phrasing.

AI has the potential to fill some of that gap. Not through emotional mimicry or sentiment emojis, but through elevated signal detection. This means picking up subtle changes in language that suggest shifts in mood, energy, or stress. Over time, these tools can create a mirror, for individuals and teams, that reflects not just what was said, but what was likely felt.

Done right, these sorts of 'listening' tools give managers another layer of context before tough conversations. It helps peers spot when a colleague might need care, or space, or a reset.

And it gives people a better shot at seeing themselves clearly, too. Because the truth is, emotional intelligence has always been communication intelligence. And over the years, bureaucracy has made it rather unintelligent.



implementing AI-enhanced communication that actually works



1 Assessment: Diagnosing Your Communication Debt

Before any change can take hold, organizations need to confront an uncomfortable truth: most of their communication systems weren't designed — they just happened. They evolved by default. Meetings piled up, slack channels multiplied, decks got heavier, and language got blurrier in service of the great Corporate machine.



That's your communication debt. And it's bigger than you think.

Start with a basic audit:

Where does communication routinely break down?

How often do meetings end without clear next steps?

Where are people editing themselves — or each other into incoherence?

But don't stop at logistics. Get underneath. Ask how safe it feels to speak plainly. Ask where people are translating meaning into politeness or policy.

Ask what's really causing the drag, and listen for inside-the-head stuff: fear, politics, indecision, noise.

Communication isn't just about structure. It's about beliefs. So any real assessment has to map not just tools, but must get at the psychological truth as well.

2 Elimination: Killing the Language That's Killing You

Once you've spotted the friction, it's time to start cutting.

This doesn't mean launching a war on every acronym or rewriting your entire wiki from scratch. It means identifying the worst offenders — the phrases, sentence structures, and stylistic habits that consistently confuse more than they clarify — and beginning to unwind them. Pay close attention to the kind of language that's often mistaken for competence or authority but in reality serves only to obscure meaning, distance people from one another, and add friction to already bloated workflows.

Start with what's most visible and most consequential: onboarding documents, internal announcements, strategic updates. Rework them in plain English. Build a culture where clarity isn't just tolerated, and where asking "what does that actually mean?" is treated as a sign of rigor, not a threat to someone's ego.

This is where AI can be a valuable partner as a clarity filter. Use it to analyze your team's communication materials, identify patterns of obfuscation, surface overcomplicated phrasing, and offer cleaner alternatives.

Whether it's rewriting an email, tightening a presentation, or summarizing a meeting in language that actually reflects what was said, the goal is always the same: remove the friction that clouds understanding.

This isn't just an editing exercise. It's about trust. Language is how you signal what kind of organization you are — not just to the outside world, but to your own people. The more clearly you communicate, the more aligned your culture becomes.

3 Replacement: Designing for Clarity, Not Just Efficiency

Once the noise is cleared, you need something better in its place, not just different language, but a different philosophy of communication altogether. This is where principles matter. Instead of drafting new rules about tone or formatting, focus on shared communication values: clarity over cleverness, truth

over tone, audience-first above all else. These shouldn't live in your brand guide; they should show up in how your team actually speaks, writes, and collaborates. They're not just content rules — they're cultural ones.

The right AI tools can help reinforce these

principles, not by enforcing style points, but by spotting when language starts to drift, when something is unclear, unnecessarily abstract, or likely to be misunderstood. Think of these tools not as editors or watchdogs, but as co-pilots — quiet assistants that can catch misalignment before it spreads, offering just enough support to keep the message sharp without turning it sterile. In many ways, they serve as a second brain always attuned to what might be missed or misread.

But none of this works if people still believe that simplicity equals stupidity. Too often, clarity is mistaken for naivety, especially in environments where performance is performative and language becomes a tool for posturing rather than understanding.

That mindset has to change, and it starts with leaders who are willing to drop the performance and return to first principles.

The point of language, from the very beginning, [has always been to coordinate action](#) reduce friction, and build shared understanding. That's it. If your communication isn't doing that, it doesn't matter how polished it sounds. It's not serving the basic purpose.

Such a shift has to be modeled at the top, but reinforced across the middle, in peer reviews, in all-hands updates, in how feedback is delivered and decisions are explained. If you want clarity to be the norm, you have to reward it out loud, not as a soft skill, but as a signal of competence and leadership.

4 Beyond Clarity: The Deeper Reason

This isn't just about cutting the fluff from your emails or trimming the fat from meetings. It's about getting back to the original purpose of communication—what it has always been about.

Humans developed language to work together more effectively, to understand each other, to solve problems that no one could solve alone. And over time, we've buried that purpose under layers of abstraction, formality, and posturing.

AI gives us an opportunity to correct course. *Not to speak for us, but to help us speak more clearly.* To help us say what we mean. And maybe, to help us listen a little better too.

The organizations that thrive in this next chapter won't be the ones that automate the most or talk the loudest. They'll be the ones that communicate with precision, that align with ease, and that build trust with every sentence.

It's not just about efficiency.
It's about integrity.





At Hatchproof, we believe that better language makes better teams.

We've built Behavioral AI not to replace human interaction, but to support it — to bring more clarity, more alignment, and more intention into the way people work together.



hatchproof

If you're ready to move away from
performance speak and toward real
understanding, we'd love to show you how

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