Blog



THE TYRANNY OF ABBREVIATIONS

We live in a world of abbreviations – most of the three letter sort. Whilst this seems to save us a lot of time when working with colleagues from our immediate tribe – I am guessing that most of us rarely think about the downsides.

Appreciating how cognitive overload affects our performance abbreviations have become a bit of a 'thing' for me – but joining a new team and a new organisation took this to a new and personal level.

So why SOB?

I'm not a shy person so when **SOB** didn't make any sense to me in a busy team meeting I asked politely for an explanation. It's clear to me now on telling this story that whilst my brain was saying **S**hortness **O**f **B**reath, others have suggested **S**on **O**f a **B**itch, a phrase more commonly heard outside of healthcare!



What I find slightly distressing is that both these explanations fell short of the Strategic Outline Business case being described by my colleague!
So why tell this story? I believe that our over reliance on abbreviations cause the following problems:

1. **Brain overload..**

- Do I 'filter out' the letters 'I just don't get' to ease my brain ache?
- Or invest time searching my memory for a translation that seems to match?

2. **Subtle power play leaving juniors and new comers on the sidelines wondering:**

- Dare I ask for a translation?
- Stay silent, hope no one will notice I'm not following the conversation?
- Keep my head down to avoid being asked to act?
- Speak up and risk looking foolish or receive disapproving looks from senior?

And the risks?

Whilst these problems occur communication is compromised, productive conversations curtailed, opportunities to develop shared purpose lost and, on occasions, important decisions and actions put at risk. And let's not gloss over the way language 'known only to some' denies power to others.



It might not be intentional, but it is real, it DOES happen, AND is pervasive in some places.

Who perpetuates this behaviour? Well, all of us, almost everywhere AND in epidemic proportions! Team meetings, slide decks, oral presentations, emails and briefing notes passed down from on high – with all the good intent in the world to communicate - left to chance.

What's to be done? Well rather than judge others, why not see if you can catch yourself at it? You might be surprised, and even a little shocked! And if you do catch yourself then see if you can train yourself out of it, starting with your most diverse 'tribe' or audience and working in.

So now I've shared my abbreviation nightmare – think of just ONE that you'd like to consign to the bin and tweet us at @QIClearn

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