

DESPERATELY SEEKING CLARITY

The credit crunch shows we must give clarity a place on the board and in the exam room. Jon Moon explains

A call for change

Because of the economic mess, people are calling for change: tighter regulation, better governance and more. However, all are meaningless without something else. Clarity. Without it, directors can't direct, banks can't oversee, regulators can't regulate, governments can't govern. It's like "The Day of the Jackal" when the Police Chief explains that his security forces are powerless because, without knowing the Jackal's name, they're unable to chase, arrest or kill the assassin – and so solemnly concludes: "the first task, without which *all other proposals become meaningless*, is to give this man a name".

For me, that name is clarity. People say that "information is power", but it isn't. Clarity is. For, without clarity, "*all other proposals become meaningless*".

Just a lot of common sense

Surely, though, clarity's common sense. Got a lot of numbers? Easy - do a pie chart, and doing it in 3-D is good fun too.



Marvel at the colours of these 3-D graphs!

Got a complex point to make? Again, easy – carve the text into brief sections, each starting with a little black dot (a "bullet point"). Yet do these work? No – so many notes and reports are impenetrable. Computers really fool us into thinking our documents and slides are clear.

Also, people aren't aware just how much clearer things can be. Take the London Tube map - before Mr Beck redid it in 1932, the map was a literal diagram of where trains went and everyone thought it fine. Mr Beck's new map showed just how average earlier maps

had been⁽¹⁾. And so it is in business – until something better comes along, we don't realise that most information is unclear.

It gets worse though.

When people try for greater clarity, they go about it the wrong way. They do computing courses ("do great slides!!!") or writing or communicating courses. Or they insist on one-page summaries. Yet these miss the point. Computing courses teach you a thousand and one things a computer can do, but not what you *should* do. "Writing" courses work if better writing is the answer, but often it's best to get rid of words and do something else instead like a graph, table or flowchart. Communicating courses make you think about your objectives and messages, but, for many of us, we know them already, we just want help conveying them clearly. As for one-page summaries, yes, a confusing one-page note wastes less time than a confusing ten-pager, but it's still confusing. Think of CVs – many are just one or two pages, but they're still awful. See the text box below for more.

A CV & one-page note... transformed

"Writing" courses strive to improve the words, but, often, a document needs a different layout instead. So see my 'before' and 'after' of a CV and a one-page note - visit www.jmoon.co.uk/director.cfm. The CV is a free Word template that's been adopted and adapted by thousands of people from plc board director to office junior. The one-page note is a real Cabinet briefing paper. The documents have been *transformed* using WiT™, my alternative to bullets that has 3 times more impact. WiT™ has made influential friends, getting praise from the Plain English Campaign, the CEO of ICAEW (Chartered Accountants), and the CEO of JLT plc (FTSE 250 plc). So see for yourself just how much clearer your information can be.

Whose job is it anyway?

If information should be clearer, why not have someone in charge of clarity? After all, someone's in charge of most other aspects of information - Finance ensures it's correct, the "Knowledge" function ensures it's shared among staff, and IT ensures it's timely (in fact, some IT vendors say their software will produce your information pack with just four clicks of a mouse... which means we can churn out confusing packs even more quickly).

But who's in charge of clarity? Certainly not the Communications Directors – they make the Board look good in front of staff, shareholders and others; they build consensus, manage messages and more. But they don't, for instance, monitor the

Finance and HR Board packs for clarity. And given how unclear most sales pitches are, I doubt they check them either. No-one is responsible for clarity. Have you ever heard of a Director of Clarity? This must change. Organisations should appoint such a person.

Checking rules are followed

Will organisations accept such an appointment though, someone who checks that other departments' work is up to scratch. Well, they already do. HR Directors ensure staff comply with employment rules, IT Directors ensure staff comply with data protection rules, Finance Directors ensure staff comply with expenses rules (except if you're an MP), and so on. It happens all the time – except for the very topic that's cost us trillions: clarity (see text box overleaf).

But with clarity, can someone ensure staff comply with *rules*? Clarity covers graphs, tables, layout and much more, and, with these topics, are there rules? Surely we can't claim a particular graph or font or table layout is better than all others - surely, beauty is in the eye of the beholder, the best way is subjective and depends on your objectives and your audience. With clarity, many people believe there are no rules or absolutes.

These beliefs are wrong. Firstly, they're self-serving. It's all very cosy and convenient for people to believe there are no absolutes than to admit their ignorance, that they don't know the rules for clarity.

Secondly, these beliefs are blinkered. If you don't know the right way, it doesn't mean there isn't a right way.

Thirdly, they're flawed. Look at better writing. Most people realise there are tips for good writing. Yes, what you write depends on your objectives and audience, but you can still write well or write poorly.

So it is with clarity. It's not all subjective, there are many absolutes to learn. And ensuring staff learn them is part of the role of the Director of Clarity.

Direction for the Director

The Director is to get clarity into an organisation's documents. They'll review documents, talk to authors and audiences, identify areas to improve, organise training, raise awareness, redo documents, monitor progress and so on. My website has more.

All very interesting, but no-one's seen a Director of Clarity before - what does one look like? He or she needs traits that aren't often seen together: quizzical, analytical, even pedantic, yet also ambassadorial, motivational, engaging. And they must be at least reasonable at communicating.

But more importantly are their *beliefs* – they must believe that, with clarity, there are rules, *absolutes*. Many good communicators would be bad Directors of Clarity because they believe that showing information is subjective and depends on your audience and objectives. Avoid them.

Also avoid people who are into “prettification”, people who are more interested in colour than content or who pepper reports with photos of beautiful business people (see this page for what I mean). If you don’t, your reports will probably be pretty, but vacuous⁽²⁾.

To ensure you appoint someone with the right beliefs, my website has a quiz that helps assess candidates. There’s also an example job advert – and, as it says, the role needn’t be full-time but could be done alongside someone’s other Board duties.



Pointless business photo: “man presenting”

Pushback the Director will face

Some people will say to the Director: “no-one’s complained about that report”, or “It must be fine, the CEO likes it”, or “we asked our stakeholders about it and they said blah-blah”. So remember the London Tube map – people don’t realise just how much clearer their information can be. Also, don’t wait for HR to do a “Training Needs Analysis” (wow). People don’t ask to learn clarity – they don’t realise they’re bad at it and don’t realise there are rules to learn. And even if they did, it’s more fun to sign up for a “Body Language” course (“His report is bad but he *sits* well”). Yet I don’t recall anyone blaming the credit crunch on bad body language...

The benefits of clarity today

Get the appointment right and it’ll change your life. You’ll see just how much better “clear” can be. It’s a virtuous circle too: the more people see clear work, the more they want to see it.

It’ll benefit your organisation hugely. Instead of struggling through their monthly packs, Boards will get documents they immediately understand, that they can easily refer back to in discussion. They’ll have more informed conversations and reach better decisions more quickly. Perhaps they’ll decide not to enter a new sector... such as sub-prime mortgages.

And if you don’t review work but produce it, the benefits are even bigger. You’ll do work that others praise and envy. After all, clear work shows clear thinking and clear thinking impresses. Your Board packs will influence. Your

client pitches will win business. Yes, the organisation will benefit, but you’ll benefit even more. The bosses will *like* you. It sounds trite, but it’s true. Because people waste so much time struggling through turgid rubbish, they’re grateful beyond measure when they finally get work that has clarity and impact.

And all this explains why being Director of Clarity is such a great job – everyone will like *you* because you’ve helped them at last get what they want and need.

Clarity for tomorrow too

The managers of tomorrow must learn clarity too. It’s not happening though. Consider, for instance, the professional Institutes for the “numbers” people in business – actuaries, bankers, accountants and the like: they teach their students how to crunch numbers but not how to show them clearly. Clarity isn’t part of their syllabi. Clarity, they surmise, is something people learn on-the-job. Yet lots of their work is impenetrable, so “on-the-job” training won’t work. The blind lead the blind, and lack of clarity prevails.

Also, people surmise, you can’t examine clarity. My website shows you can.

Then again, perhaps the Institutes equate clarity with topics like “motivating staff” – something that’s part of post qualified development, an optional extra, a nice-to-have general business skill. It isn’t, because, without clarity, “all other proposals become meaningless”.

Also, consider managers’ *perceptions* for, say, an accountant: an accountant who can’t motivate is still a good accountant – but an accountant who does unclear work isn’t. Managers believe that, for accountants, clarity isn’t an optional extra, it’s a core skill. Which is why the Institutes should believe this as well (and, if they don’t, their status will suffer huge damage when the Sales Director learns clarity and shows the “number crunchers” how to show their numbers clearly...).

This must change. We must give clarity the status of a separate recognisable business discipline. It’s a big enough topic to be given that status, there are numerous tips, principles and methods. And as the credit crunch has shown, it’s important enough too.

People should learn clarity at every step of their career – at College and Business School, at induction courses when joining a company, and when studying to become accountant, salesperson or whatever. And they should not only learn clarity, they should answer exam questions on it.

The new business agenda

For 20 years, we’ve increasingly let clarity play second fiddle to a less worthy, but more fun goal: making dull work more interesting. We do work that’s fanciful, entertaining, distracting. We use funky fonts and plot colourful 3-D graphs. We use groovy swinging-in bullet points and toy with the shade of blue on the cover of

the report. Yes, it’s all been such fun, but we almost went bust in the process.

We must aim for a higher, more worthy goal. The credit crunch gives us the perfect opportunity to write a new agenda for business. Clarity is that new agenda and appointing a Director of Clarity is how to make it happen.

Granted, it sounds odd: a Director of Clarity. But it’s even more odd to lose trillions and not learn the lessons. Also, less than 30 years ago, there were no IT Directors, and Marketing Directors haven’t been around much longer. Now, though, it seems odd not to have these functions on the Board.

And so it’ll be for Directors of Clarity. In 20 years, we’ll look back on those strange, unenlightened days before 2009 when we didn’t have Directors of Clarity. We’ll wonder how business survived without them – then we’ll remember that, in the credit crunch, they almost didn’t.

Don’t let history repeat itself tomorrow. Appoint a Director of Clarity today.

How lack of clarity lost us trillions

OK, the debt was toxic, but a toxic substance is only dangerous if you don’t know it’s toxic and unwittingly consume it. The real danger isn’t a substance’s toxicity but our *lack of clarity about its toxicity*. And with toxic debt, there was huge lack of clarity – as Robert Peston, the BBC Economics Editor says⁽³⁾: “what triggered (the crisis) was an extraordinary statement made on 9 August 2007 by the giant French bank BNP Paribas, that it could no longer value with any confidence the US asset-backed bonds in three of its funds. It was like the little boy shouting out that the emperor has no clothes. All of a sudden, huge banks, hedge funds and professional investors woke up and recognised that they too did not know the proper value of hundreds of billions of dollars of assets they owned.” It all comes back to lack of clarity – lack of clarity helped create the toxic debt problem in the first place, and – as Robert Peston has just explained – it then also turned the problem into a full-blown crisis.

About Jon Moon (www.jmoon.co.uk)

Jon is a leading authority on clarity. Visit www.jmoon.co.uk/director.cfm for more on the Director role. Or contact Jon to get clarity.



“Let’s add a 3-D exploding pie chart – nice”