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We assume that others mean the same as us when they use the same words, but this is often not true. The meaning in two people's heads is never exactly the same, and it is often significantly different even when they are sure they have agreed. This causes all kinds of errors and demoralises people without their knowing why. And it is completely unseen.

## Practise these four principles in every conversation:

- When you talk to someone about work, remember that the aim is to arrive at the same understanding, so you have the same picture in your head as they have and there will be no unmet expectations or nasty surprises. In other words the aim is to share, not just to ask or tell.
- This entails a balance of telling and asking, and periodically checking back, by asking them to describe their picture of the work so you can see whether it is the same as yours. Ask supplementary questions to be absolutely sure there is no gap between your understanding and theirs.
- At the same time watch out – some words never have a common meaning, and are bound to cause problems. All abstract nouns – words that refer to ideas, not real things – are in this category and must be unpacked, talking over what exactly they mean in real terms, before the result of using them can be predicted. It is never enough to assume that someone else has the same mental picture of what 'values' means, for example – try getting two people to write down what they think it means and compare the results. Now do this for every abstract word in all your company operating documents, and think about the potential for confusion...
- Look beyond the individual's own job description – everyone needs to know why they are doing their tasks, how it meets the needs of the company, their colleagues and the end user or customer, so that the work has meaning and purpose.
- Almost everyone works best when they feel they are part of a group, something bigger than themselves, and that feeling of group membership comes about when people share intentions, experience and ideas. So when sharing ideas make sure that everyone in the group has the same picture – it will reduce errors and improve group cohesion.



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