

FACT SHEET









Are We Speaking the Same Language?

14 Lessons to Reduce Project Miscommunication













I am a Canadian project professional. Living and working in Denmark from 1986 to 1988 taught me that communication and shared understanding are harder to achieve than most people expect. Later, I learned that this same challenge repeatedly affects capital project success. This fact sheet summarizes 14 practical lessons about communication, supported by short examples and key takeaways.

- Roy O. Christensen

No.	Lessons	Facts and Key Knowledge
1	Ask for clarification when there is potential for misunderstanding or miscommunication.	 <p>When learning a new language, a common frustration is the inability to understand information or instructions. It is always a bad idea to ignore the misunderstanding or pretend everything is understood. One of the earliest and most useful Danish phrases I learned was <i>hvad betyder det</i>, which means: <i>what does that mean?</i></p> <hr/>  <p>Ask questions that clarify meaning.</p>
2	Sometimes the same thing has different names. Sometimes different things have the same name.	 <p>Ordering a Danish pastry in English at a restaurant in Denmark may confuse the waiter (at least briefly) because, while most Danes understand what Danish pastry is (in English), the name used by Danes is <i>Wienerbrød</i> or <i>Vienna bread</i>. In Germany it is called <i>Copenhagener</i>. Same thing; different names.</p> <hr/>  <p>Learn the different names used for the same thing, and confirm meaning when the same name may refer to different things.</p>
3	The language used to communicate understanding must be suited to the audience. In Denmark this is usually Danish. But outside of Denmark, it almost certainly is not.	 <p>Once, one of my Danish language classmates exclaimed that, <i>compared to English, Danish has a different word for everything</i> – which is both profound and silly. Of course, another language uses different words for different things! How could it not? In Denmark, children learn Danish from birth. In school, they learn English starting at age 11 and German at age 14. Many also learn another elective language such as French or Spanish. Hence, a substantial number of Danes are at least functionally trilingual. Denmark is a small country with a population of fewer than 6 million that recognizes the need to communicate with others in their language.</p> <hr/>  <p>Consider your audience and employ their language when you communicate.</p>
4	Be creative and have fun while striving to reach goals.	 <p>When attempting to register for a Danish-as-a-second-language class, I learned that only two Danish classes were available. Neither were suited to my level of understanding. The first class was for immigrants who spoke no Danish at all – it was too elementary. The second class was for Germans who spoke Danish but wanted to read and write Danish – it was too advanced. So, I did the only reasonable thing: I enrolled in both classes. In one, I was the most advanced student; in the other, I was the least advanced. This was a great experience. In the first class, I helped others learn (the best way to learn is by teaching). In the second class, I needed others to help me learn (the second-best way to learn is to surround yourself with knowledgeable people). While unconventional, it was a fun and creative way to learn Danish and gave perspective that would have been impossible in a single conventional class.</p> <hr/>  <p>Use creative means to accomplish your goals.</p>

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5	Being unable to speak in the audience's language may mean communication is impossible.	 <p>During a visit to Denmark in 1975, my friend and I stayed for one week at his <i>moster's</i> or <i>mother's sister's</i> or <i>aunt's</i> home in København. One day, we visited a store to purchase buttermilk. We did not know the Danish word <i>kærnemælk</i>, so we used the literal translation from English, <i>smørmælk</i>. Nobody understood what we wanted; therefore, we went home empty-handed.</p>
		 <p>Speak the language the audience understands. Doing otherwise is futile.</p>
6	Learn from the mistakes of others.	 <p>When I heard Danes making grammatical mistakes in English, I sometimes copied their errors to speak Danish correctly. For example, in English much money (singular) is correct while many money (plural) is incorrect. In Danish, the word money is plural and thus the phrase <i>mange penge</i> or <i>many money</i> is correct.</p>
		 <p>There is more than one way to learn from the mistakes of others.</p>
7	There is more than one way to acquire knowledge.	 <p>In addition to taking the Danish-as-a-second-language classes mentioned in 4 in this list, I also took a German class to learn Danish! The class was introductory, so the teacher would speak about 30 Danish words for every 3 German words. Many German words are like Danish words, so I learned more Danish and some German. For example, <i>aufpassen</i> in German is <i>pas på</i> in Danish – which means: <i>be careful</i>.</p>
		 <p>Knowledge can be acquired everywhere.</p>
8	Do not assume you know what others know or understand.	 <p>Danes would immediately recognize me as a foreigner because of my accent. But they would often assume I was German and hence, would speak German to me. I would respond in Danish: <i>jeg er ikke tysker</i> or <i>I am not German</i> and continue speaking Danish, which was usually met with surprise. No one would guess I was a Canadian fluent in English, rather than a German. They assumed they knew where I was from and what language I spoke. Their incorrect assumptions guided their misunderstanding.</p>
		 <p>Making assumptions is always a bad idea. Do not make assumptions.</p>
9	Humour is useful for learning and remembering knowledge.	 <p>The Danish expression <i>god råd er dyr</i> or <i>good advice is expensive</i> is easy to understand in English. But in Danish, these words have two meanings:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dyr means animal or expensive; and, • Råd means advice or rotten. <p>Hence, the expression may be twisted into <i>god dyr er råd</i> or <i>good animals are rotten</i>. This implies there are no good animals, which reflects a bygone time when six horsepower meant using six horses.</p>
		 <p>Use humour as a mnemonic device to retain knowledge.</p>

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10	Sometimes a textbook is more useful as a bookend than as a source of knowledge.	<p>Once, I attempted to discuss the Danish city of Åbenrå located in Østjylland or East Jutland with someone. I pronounced it clearly – exactly as my textbook instructed. The letter å is pronounced like the aw in law. But they did not understand me. I was speaking clearly and correctly, so why could they not understand? Åbenrå? Åbenrå? Åbenrå?</p> <p>Later, I noticed that the textbook was published in the United Kingdom. The pronunciation was described for British English speakers, not Canadian English speakers. For a Canadian, the correct description is to pronounce å like the ow in row. If you are going to use a textbook, be sure to choose one that is appropriate for your purpose and audience. Street or tribal knowledge is often more accurate than documented or textbook knowledge because it is current, whereas other resources can become outdated or inapplicable.</p>
		<p>One textbook is no panacea for learning.</p>
11	Even an experienced or knowledgeable person may need to confirm understanding.	<p>Sometimes it felt like, for every word I learned in Danish, I forgot a word in English. Today, decades later, I can still easily remember the word <i>sild</i> but regularly struggle to remember its English equivalent: <i>herring</i>. Knowledge can be foggy or forgotten for many reasons; it is human to err. See also, 1 in this list.</p>
		<p>Confirm and reconfirm understanding frequently.</p>
12	New knowledge is always being developed but old knowledge is the foundation.	<p>As a child, I heard my father Oliver speaking Danish. This was exotic and unintelligible to me. By the time my father and sister Ruth visited me in Denmark in 1987, I could speak fluent Danish. For the first time, I could speak with my father in Danish. It was rewarding and strange! It was rewarding because my father could hear me speak his native (childhood) tongue. It was strange because he spoke Danish like his parents did when they emigrated at the turn of the 19th century. He spoke old Danish, not rigsdansk (standard Danish). Nonetheless, even using old and new dialects, we understood each other.</p>
		<p>We stand on the shoulders of giants. Respect the authority of old knowledge and use that foundation to foster new knowledge for future generations.</p>
13	Transferable skills are extremely valuable.	<p>Scandinavian languages are largely mutually intelligible, so communication between Scandinavians is possible. The languages are more similar in writing than in speech because speech is more fluid. Danish is the official language of Denmark and the Faroe Islands, and it is the second language in Greenland and Iceland. Danish is more like Norwegian and less like Swedish, and Swedish is the second language of Finland.</p> <p>When my friend Javad immigrated to Canada from Sweden in the mid-1990s, he spoke only Farsi and Swedish. During conversations, I spoke Danish to him and he spoke Swedish to me until he had learned functional English. Speaking Danish to Javad helped him learn English.</p>
		<p>Learn transferrable skills because they will serve you well in the future. Keep them in your pocket. And pull them out when needed.</p>
14	Jargon and slang frustrate communication.	<p>Swedes found it easier to understand me speaking Danish than the Danes did! This was because I spoke in simple sentences, slowly, and used no jargon or slang. Jargon includes abbreviations, expressions, and specialized words used by a group or profession. These terms are difficult for others to understand. Communication must be suited to the audience, as mentioned in 3 in this list.</p>
		<p>Avoid jargon and slang whenever possible.</p>

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What Learning Danish Really Taught Me

Many of the lessons learned from my experience in Denmark proved relevant well beyond language learning, and they repeated throughout my professional life. Perhaps most persistent was how often miscommunication and misunderstanding interfere with project success. At times, it can feel as if project personnel are speaking different languages – and sometimes this is true both literally and figuratively.

As I learned Danish, I experienced firsthand why language barriers must be overcome. Clear communication is a prerequisite for project success; it is not optional. Put bluntly, if people cannot communicate effectively, they will struggle to succeed.

The Construction Industry Institute observed that industry lacks a common language and that companies use their own terminology, which can be confusing (*Achieving Zero Rework Through Effective Supplier Quality Practices*, 2014). Moreover, Canadian Manufacturers and Exporters identified that detailed how-to guidelines are needed to improve project communication (*Oil Sands Manufacturing*, 2013). Common understanding is needed for projects to communicate effectively, and that understanding must be recorded in a practical resource such as a glossary.

The Glossary of Common Industry and Project Terminology

Clear terminology supports project success, while ambiguous terminology can frustrate communication and contribute to delays, rework, and avoidable conflict. To help address this gap, I compiled the 630-page *Glossary of Common Industry and Project Terminology*, which defines thousands of common industry and project terms. The glossary is intended for professionals working in capital projects for the energy, industrial, mining, petrochemical, pipeline, power, and related sectors, and it provides a consistent reference for project language.

The article [What Learning Danish Really Taught Me](#) expands on the themes summarized in this fact sheet.

Purchase the *Glossary of Common Industry and Project Terminology* from Amazon, [here](#).
