Summary

Wising Up to Plain Language

The Power of Plain Language on Profits

VisibleThread.com

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Have you read something so muddling you must read it three times before understanding it? Or worse, did you put a report to one side "for later" due to its density? How many times has it happened over the last week? Imagine how much this costs you. Not only in terms of time and productivity, but beyond that, into business and money.

In this guide, we'll walk you through how using plain language supports clearer communications and alignment among large organizations. We also address the tricky matter of team buy-in, because – let's face it – no one likes change. That said, change is necessary to stay competitive, to drive efficiencies, and to meet market demands.

You should be leveraging your comms to bring about pivotal organizational change – regardless of industry. And, as outlined below, poor communication can be very costly.

Our Experts

We're very lucky to have access to a range of experts. They span the field of plain language use, change management, organizational alignment. For this guide, VisibleThread's Laura Matthews, Micheál McGrath, and Chloe Norwood discuss the power of plain language with:

Deborah Bosly

Founder of **The Plain Language Group**

Pinaki Kathiari

CEO of Local Wisdom, a **digital communications agency**

Zora Artis

Alignment and communication strategist with **Artis Advisory**. Also co founder of **The Alignment People**

Andrew Lohmeier

Director of content for the marketing group at **Putnam Investments**

Kevin Press

Plain language consultant, plus the founder of **Kevin Press Communications**

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Identifying Misalignment in Organizations

We will tackle the cost of convoluted jargon to your company. But first, let's outline how it affects every facet of your business.

Bad comms leads to company misalignment. Often, this will present in organizations as:

1. Siloed thinking or groupthink
2. General lack of clarity within the business or the organization
3. Underlying friction of some sort

Direct issues resulting from misalignment include:

1. Teams aren't as effective as they could be
2. Missed opportunities
3. Cost overruns
4. Reputational issues
5. High levels of staff turnover. Why? Perhaps they don't feel like they can speak up on different issues. This is what Zora refers to as a "psychological safety issue."

In Zora's experience, there are two levels of alignment that needs to occur for a company to operate.

1. Organizational Alignment: This is the strategic alignment enterprise wide. It's in depth and requires analysis.
2. Team Alignment: Whether it starts at executive or functional team level, this form of alignment involves creating a diagnostic. This is a survey of the leaders, whereupon a report gets created. Zora refers to it as her "Team Reality Report." It's not as ominous as it sounds.

> **"This gives you insight of what the reality is for that team. From how aligned they are to the purpose, to the values, the vision, each other, and to the strategy. It's literally getting the team to look into a mirror. Then, I will facilitate a frank conversation, so it's quite respectful. This dialogue helps to classify and prioritize what the gaps, or misalignment, in their team. Then, we explore and work out how to close those gaps... Leaders and employees have a disconnection in terms of what the reality is within a business."**
>
> **Zora Artis**

Clear, unbiased communication is the cornerstone of facilitating this process (something Zora delves into from 10:26 minutes). When it comes to the way we communicate, the language we use is really important. We must have consistency. Not just in the tone of voice, but also the words that we use. And, the way we say it.

Your team needs to understand what that looks like so they can deliver on it. Otherwise, gaps occur and that's where misinformation thrives. This is where using plain language comes in to play.

Using Plain Language
– It's not dumbing down...

Remember

Its not Dumbing Down

Its Wising Up

It is, in fact, wising up. It's wising up to the fact that most people now scan a body of text to find something of interest. They scan to get the gist of the information in half the time.

What is plain language?

Zora's Guiding Principles in terms of plain language are "the three Cs". They highlight how clear communication is connects directly to positive business outcomes.

1. **Clarity:** Be intentional. Be clear on what you're talking about, or what the brand is about.

2. **Consistency:** Approaching how you communicate consistently. For instance, how you apply your brand, whether it's from a language perspective, or a visual perspective. Bring a consistent behavioral tone of voice. All of these different elements of constancy are key.

3. **Coherency:** When you see a message, irrespective of context, it should make sense. It should stand alone and not require other messages for it to function. Coherency's best friend is simplicity.

Zora dives into her potential "fourth C", which is "Catalyst", from 37:12 minutes.

Founder of the Plain Language Group, Deborah Bosely, echoes this ethos. She cites "clear, concise, and credible communication" as a game changer if adopted correctly.

Why use plain language?

It eliminates the sort of jargon that isn't easy to understand or translate into another language. Plain language should save time and leave little opportunity for confusion.

Or, as Deborah states at 17:57; "No one ever complains that information is too easy to understand."

It's also important to be aware of how your comms can make the target audience feel. We are humans with emotions. So, emotions will always be there – whether we like to admit to it or not!

Plain Language and Change Management

Another thing we humans have in common is our inherent dislike of change. That's why using plain language as an intrinsic tool of change management is imperative.

Speaking about his niche of change management, CEO of Local Wisdom Pinaki Kathiari has this to say:

> **"I think as humans, we are creatures of habit. Brains are wired to find patterns and adjust to those patterns. So when something disrupts that, I think it goes against our natural being and we fight it… I'm very careful of when I initiate a change initiative. The more change initiatives within an organization – the more work is required. You must be mindful of that."**
>
> **Pinaki Kathiari**

Here are Pinaki's three things to ensure change management buy-in from your team.

1. Align it to everyone else's goals. It's really important to talk about the business, but also how it serves people? How is it going to benefit them at the end of the day? In short, what is in it for them?

2. Make it fun! When change happens, it creates anxiety. One of the best ways to counteract anxiety is to create joy. Pinaki has a great anecdote at 32 minutes. He recounted a colleague turning new compliance paperwork into an office "form party".

3. Be patient. People need time to process things. How can we fit in time to give people that grace to process that change?

> **"The more change we add to the scenario, the harder it gets, the closer you'll get people to burnout. So we have to be careful of all of that."**
>
> **Pinaki Kathiari**

One surefire way to aid the tricky transition of change is – of course – plain language.

The Business Case for Plain Language

During her chat with Chloe, Deborah outlined how employing plain language can help businesses across the board.

1. **Testing is your friend:** How will your comms make the intended audience feel? At the 20:26 mark, Deborah highlights the importance of this. In short, a friendly letter about social benefits resulted in 10,000 panicked calls from soon-to-be retirees. In other words, initially trying your new plain language comms on a test panel is beneficial.

2. **Increasing returns:** Edelman discovered that a poorly written shareholder report will hurt the price of the stock. Companies with effective communicators as leaders brought 47% higher total return to shareholders. This is over the last five years. And that's why Warren Buffet famously approves reports written in plain language. Deborah provides more information on this from the 26-minute mark.

3. **Building trust:** Edelman's Trust Index indicates the top factor when increasing trust is easily understood Terms & Conditions. The same is said for less jargon and easier readability. Deborah discusses this further from 28:16 minutes.

4. **Providing accessibility:** People have a right to understand the information that effects their lives. Therefore, it's crucial to consider how accessible your messaging is to your target audience.

5. **Improve reputation:** When you're at the forefront of championing plain language, your company's reputation is bolstered. You have your customer's back, you're guiding them instead of talking down to them.

6. **Making customers happy:** Clear content makes people happy. Happy customers buy more products. When they get good service and the products are of high quality, they tend to return. The opposite is also true, which Deborah delves into from 37:42 minutes.

For Zora's take on ensuring team buy-in, go to the 43:10 minute mark of her chat with Micheál.

The Role of Technology for Writers

Let's be honest. Writers have a love/hate relationship with tech. While the world of technology makes writers' work less complicated, there are also challenges.

1. Writers and SEO.
There are so many more factors to consider in today's multi-platform environment. When writing content for marketing financial services, Andrew Lohmeier recounts:

> **"I think a lot about our SEO team. They're reaching out to us, suggesting keywords to use in our content that we publish online. These are good suggestions, but we have the struggle of making sure that we can communicate complicated financial products. Our strategy experts have their own jargon, then there's our legal requirements. We have to respect those in order to give proper product information."**
>
> **Andrew Lohmeier**

This balancing act will be familiar to many. To make your content more viewable, more visible, more popular across digital platforms, requires being open to digital transformation.

2. Ensuring compliance and legal requirements.
That said, you still must respect the need to speak precisely about certain things, such as investments. The same applies when it comes to compliance/legal requirements.

> **"We have to use words that aren't going to mislead or miscommunicate anything about our products. With VisibleThread, we have a great advantage. We're able to integrate our editorial style guide directly into it. So, when we review a piece of content that comes from a portfolio manager, or ads that come from our search team, it can target clarity issues. It can also tackle where our style isn't necessarily applied. And it helps us to flag those areas of jargon. We know we must use specific words due to compliance or legal requirements but we don't get penalized for it. That's the aim of the game so to speak."**
>
> **Andrew Lohmeier**

3. Technology means metrics.
Once you have processes in place, you can build a reliable bank of data. These metrics will give you invaluable insight. Moreover, your ability to implement progressive communication strategies depends on speaking the bosses' language! So, that means metrics, it means KPIs.

For context, Kevin Press has this insight when chatting with VisibleThread COO Laura Matthews (38:44 minutes). As a plain language consultant, he used metrics when an insurer was reluctant to change terminology.

> **"The phrase they used was 'maximum reimbursable amount'. And I said, 'Well, why don't we just say 'the amount we cover'? This got all the way up to a VP level executive who got onto the call with me. She said, 'Absolutely no, you cannot do that'. So, I shared that it meant the difference between a Flesch Kincaid grade level of 12.8 versus 7.6. And immediately she said, 'Okay, do it'. And that was it. I knew there was no way I was gonna get her with anything but a number. It went from being a qualitative conversation to a quantitative discussion, and that made the difference."**
>
> **Kevin Press**

This fact-based approach, which tech provides, removes any subjectivity or personal bias. Instead, you're going with objective metrics. It simplifies using facts and, and data. That is one of the key drivers for why more companies are using solutions like VT Writer.

Using such software can lead to clearer communications. While AI can assist in simplifying content, it's more of a rough draft rather than a complete solution. After all, it can't convey the levels of empathy required to engage humans.

What it Could be Costing You

So, we've outlined all the ways in which plain language can help your business. Now, it's time to buckle up for some eye-watering numbers.

7.47 hrs is 18.7%* of a workweek

*Percentage is rounded

In salary terms thats $12,506 per employee

$66,967 x **18.7%** = **$12,506***

Average worker salary, per business leader estimates

Lost working time due to poor communication

Average yearly cost of lost time, per employee

*Calculated from unrounded percentage

👤 **500** 🏛 🔘 **$6.25m**

For a US company of 500 full-time employees, this amounts to $6.25M lost every year

➡ $50,000 looks prettly small now, doesn't it?

Estimated dollar value of business lost due to poor communication

% of respondents

<$5,000	$5,000 - $9,999	$10,000 - $19,999	$20,000 - $49,999	$50,000+
4%	10%	26%	38%	22%

Value of buisness lost in past year

Lack of confidence in communication could be at fault in losing deals

40% of knowledge workers | **417%** of business leaders

Report that they are not confident when communicating with external clients and vendors

Taking into account the invisible tally of workers' time, ineffective communication is costing the entire US economy $1.2 trillion every year wasted labor hours*

*Based on an estimate of 100 million knowledge workers in the US

Throughout her research, Deborah Bosely has learned that US business leaders estimate they lose 7 hours weekly to bad comms. As for the monetary cost of these communication breakdowns to companies? There are estimations that it amounts to $50k in lost business.

Taking into account the invisible tally of employees' time, ineffective communication is costing the US economy circa $1.2 trillion in wasted labor hours per annum.

How might this effect your company? Well, for context, at the 5:53 minutes, Deborah highlights the time/money wasted for managers who revise their team's work...

Hours | $ Wasted for Managers who Revise

Wasted hrs. each week	5
Number of managers	6
Hours wasted per week	30
Average hourly wage	$80
Hours wasted per year (46 weeks)	$2400
Cost of wasted hours per year	$110,400

From 7:00 minutes, Deborah showcases the high cost of translating bad writing...

High Cost of Translating Bad Writing

	Word Count	Cost to translate into 1 language ($0.25/Word)	25 languages	x 10,000 sentences (Harry Potter Novel)
Before				
What we've wondered about of late is why companies are so open to the idea of developers getting together to hold hackathons for technical coding but are so resistant to the idea of creative people getting together to do something similar for their content since content is similar to code in its potential to build the business.	54	$13.50	$337.50	$3,375.000.00
After				
Why the resistance to innovative content brainstorming? Coders do it.	**10**	**$2.50**	**$62.50**	**$625,000.00**
Savings	**81%**	**$11.00**	**$275.00**	**$2,750,000.00**

Plain Language Solves Problems

Why plain English

85% Fewer errors

After New Zealand rewrote and redesigned its citizenship application form into plain English, error rates dropped from 66% to just 10%

78% Drop in customer complaints

When the Arizona Department of Revenue improved the clarity of 3 standard customer letters, phone calls dropped from 23,000 a year to just 5,000

50% Decrease in writing time

Our efficiency study found that clients who completed a plain English reform program reduced their document drafting time by 50%

68% Decrease in reading time

When comparing a plain English version of a medical brochure with its orginal, comprehension improved, and reading time fell from 14 to 4.5 minutes

45% Increase in reader satisfaction

A foundation client who implemented a plain language program found that client satisfaction increased from 62% to well over 90%

75% Drop in negotiation time

An Australian study found that a plain English version of a lease took just 3 weeks to negotiate (with only 5 exchanges between parties) compared to a standard lease with took 3 months (and 24 exchanges.)

Wait, it's not all bad! Here are some uplifting stats showcasing how using plain language can remedy all of this.

Regardless of the area you're in – health, law finance, manufacturing – we all have a language we use to make us seem smart. In Deborah's findings, this is counter productive.

> **"According to a Stanford study undertaken with graduate students, it was determined that the more complex information was, the less respect the grad students had for the writer. And the company that produced it."**
>
> **Deborah Bosely**

Where Should You Start?

Always at the top! That said, convincing the C-Suite to prioritize plain language is still a challenge. In our experience, it often starts with individual departments recognizing the benefits and spreading awareness within the organization.

When asked how she might convince C-Suite to prioritize plain language, Deborah had this response:

> **"If I could answer that question, I would be a chamillionaire! The usual method for me is if it's someone in upper management that realizes the cost benefits and the customer benefits to clear communication. Then, that gets pushed down into the company. The norm is one siloed department decides they need to do something, and that's as far as it goes."**
>
> **Deborah Bosely**

The importance of planning

It may sound obvious, but it's always worth repeating. In order for anything to work in a business, there has to be a shared vision. Everybody's got to know what the end result needs to be. In order to sing off the same proverbial hymn sheet, lots of questions need asking and answering in a unified way.

Have you thought through what needs to change in the company

1. Are you ready to share the vision with all teams?
2. Are you ready to answer the question of who might be impacted?
3. How are they going to be impacted?
4. What is the communication plan behind that?
5. Who's owning it at every single stage of the process?

In short, people get scared if they're not brought into the conversation. Even if you don't have an update, it's really critical and important to even update them with that.

Given his experience communicating throughout the change management process, Pinaki has this insight on how leadership needs to spearhead communicating change.

> **"I've seen managers and departments turn into Lord of the Flies. They're all doing their own things separately. They're all thinking they're bringing the ball to the goal, but their goals are all in different places, right? That leads to frustration, which leads to toxicity. In turn, this leads to all types of ways where you could lose out on resources and time. Communication is vital. So please, as you're thinking about change, think about these things and make sure you're clearly articulating."**
>
> **Pinaki Kathiari**

Key Takeaway

In short, comms is imperative for alignment across an organization. It's the common thread, the enabler for alignment. This is true for any industry, whether it's governmental, commercial, or everything in-between.

Assistant Vice President of Global Brand and Marketing at Sun Life, Marianne Arnaudon attributes the use of VisibleThread throughout Sun Life to quicker comprehension, resulting in accelerated decision making.

> **"Our goal is to create a brand that is both sophisticated and accessible. One that's authentic, caring, confident and dynamic. Our brand is also built on a foundation that includes helping clients achieve lifetime financial security and live healthier lives. How plain language plays into that is really supporting our verbal identity."**

To see how VisibleThread's solutions has helped her and her colleagues to "cut through the clutter" leading to faster decision making, do make your way to our Sun Life Case Study on clear communication.

**You can view our full conversations with the experts
from this guide in the free on-demand webinars below:**
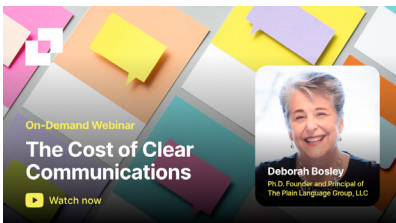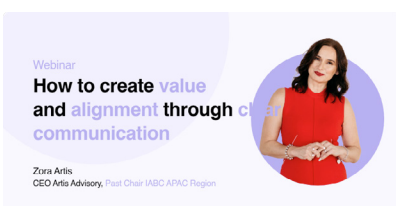
The Cost Of Clear Communications
Unlock the financial benefits of effective communication in the modern business landscape with industry expert **Deborah Bosley**, Ph.D. in this must-watch webinar.
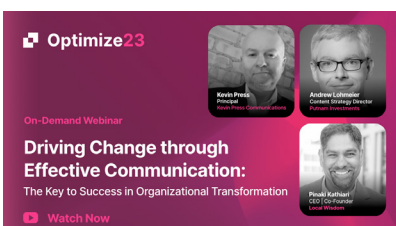
Driving Change Through Effective Communication
The Key To Success In Organizational Transformation

In this roundtable discussion, **Kevin Press**, **Andrew Lohmeier** and **Pinaki Kathiari** shared their expertise on how effective communication is the key to success in organizational transformation.

How To Create Value And Alignment Through Clear Communication
Zora Artis shares her expertise in supporting organizations in improving consistency and impact of communications. We'll be focusing on how to measure the performance and improvement of business writing.

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Need help or have a question?

Talk to us by mailing info@VisibleThread.com to find out how you can avoid these mistakes.

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