

Pinpointing behaviour

By Gail Reichert

Have you ever been misunderstood?

This article answers the following questions about pinpointing behaviour:

- What is it?
- Why is it important?
- How do I turn fuzzy descriptions into pinpointed behavioural statements?
- What if I don't pinpoint?
- When is it vital to pinpoint?

So, **have** you ever been misunderstood? I'm guessing that most of you will answer 'yes' to that question. Whatever the situation, you believed you made yourself clear, only to discover the other person misinterpreted your words. This happens. Sometimes communication between two very well-intentioned people goes astray, among other things, because of a failure to use clear and accurate language. In performance terms we call clear and accurate language, **pinpointing**.

So, what exactly is pinpointing?

We use the word 'pinpointing' for language that describes behaviour in observable terms. It is a description of a specific action, rather than an abstraction, generalisation or prediction. Further on in this article we'll talk about situations when pinpointing is invaluable. Right now, let's continue with some examples of pinpointed language and fuzzy language:

Pinpointed language	Fuzzy language
Arrive on time	Have a good attitude
Smile at others	Be approachable
Produce work that is to standard	Be a good worker
Prioritise tasks	Be a good time manager
Solve customer problem	Provide customer service

Note, that in these examples the pinpointed language is just one example of a range of behaviours that would make up, for instance, a 'good attitude'. Other pinpointed statements about 'attitude' might include:

- Volunteers to help others
- Takes action without being prompted or requested by a supervisor
- Articulates their ideas in team meetings
- Uses the active listening technique
- Offers advice to others when asked

How to turn fuzzies into pinpointed statements

You can ask yourself, 'Is this something I can observe the person doing?'

I often use the phrase that Robert F Mager¹ coined, 'Stand in the middle of the room and ...' - if a person could stand in the middle of the room and, for instance, *arrive on time*, then the statement is pinpointed. If it doesn't pass the 'stand in the middle of the room' test, for instance *be a good time manager*, then it's a fuzzy. If another person in the room couldn't see you being a good time manager, then it's not a pinpoint - it's not specific enough.

That's how to distinguish between a fuzzy and a pinpoint, so let's move on to how to develop pinpoints. We'll continue working with the fuzzy statement, *be a good time manager*.

Here's another question to ask yourself (or others, if you're working in a group); *What evidence will I accept that the person is a good time manager?*

The strategy here is, get it down, then get it good. Start brainstorming for the evidence. It's important to do this step without judgement - you'll likely generate pinpoints and fuzzies, but you can sort out the fuzzies from the pinpoints later on. Sometimes it helps to think of a person who is a good time manager, and write down the things that person says and does when they are demonstrating that behaviour.

You might end up with a list like this:

- Has a list of tasks to complete
- Enters appointments and tasks into Outlook
- Arrives on time
- Plans their next day before leaving for the night
- Uses a system to prioritise tasks
- Estimates time to complete tasks
- Handles interruptions effectively
- Schedules quiet time for thinking
- Aware of their values

When you have your initial brainstorm list, sort those statements into pinpoints and those that need more work. In the list above, the statement 'aware of their values' is not pinpointed. All others are. Once you've sorted the fuzzies decide whether the list you've generated provides you with sufficient evidence of the skill 'is a good time manager'.

Why is it important to use pinpointed language?

If you've ever been misunderstood, you already know why it's important to use pinpointed language. But let's get into practical examples in business because if you tried to pinpoint constantly you'd drive yourself insane.

The general rule is that if things are going fine, performance is as expected, then you don't need to pinpoint. But if, for instance, you are responsible for conducting performance or development

¹ Goal Analysis, Robert F Mager. 1997, The Center for Effective Performance

discussions with your team, if you are inducting a new employee with limited knowledge, if you are clarifying what someone else has said to you, then pinpointing is for you.

Imagine you're conducting a development discussion and assessing a team member against the competency model for their job role. The role calls for a person to *'build rapport and make favourable impressions'*. You assess your team member as having a problem in this area. You might say something like, 'Jane, you need to work on this area of rapport because you're not up to the standard we need at your level.' Jane listens to this, but in her mind she's thinking, 'Build rapport? What does he mean by this? I get on OK with people and no-one's ever complained to me. I'm confused about what to do now.'

Who's right and who's wrong?

If both you and Jane are highly skilled communicators, you may be able to negotiate a good outcome by exploring what each other really means; finding areas in common and distinguishing where the actual differences are. But as it stands initially, there's no way of saying who's right and who's wrong. There's also no guide to Jane as to what she can do to improve your assessment of her ability to build rapport.

In this instance, a development or performance discussion, the skill of pinpointing would help to bridge the gap in the two perspectives.

Building rapport is one of those skills that is predominantly unconscious on the part of a skilled performer. Ask most people how they build rapport and they will give broad generalisations.

The important point to remember here is that if Jane doesn't already know how to build rapport, then simply telling her to do it is no help to her. She needs finer distinctions (pinpoints) that she can practice to improve her rapport building skills. For instance, here are some pinpoints on building rapport from a coaching programme Leader's Edge recently designed for a client:

- use universals and truisms at the start of the conversation
- match or mirror:
 - torso angle and orientation
 - head tilt and angle
 - hand and finger gestures
- adapt to their predominant language style (visual, auditory, kinesthetic)
- adapt to their speed of speech and pitch/tone of voice
- nod your head subtly as they are speaking
- reflect their words back to them

In this programme participants were learning, through practice and feedback, to build rapport with their staff in one-on-one coaching situations.

Pinpointing behaviour can also be used:

- When giving positive reinforcement to encourage repeat performance - 'Thanks for arriving at the meeting on time and with all the resources.'
- When setting objectives and goals - it's the 'S for specific' part of the SMART acronym

- When coaching or instructing someone on how to do a task they are unfamiliar with
- When giving feedback on performance
- In situations of conflict or disagreement - pinpointing often reduces the conflict because of greater understanding of the other's position.
- To clarify another person's expectations

Another example of how pinpointing can be useful as an 'efficiency tool' in organisations was given to me by a client in a conflict management programme. Participants learned how to pinpoint during one session. In the follow-up session we reviewed how people had applied the skill. Ben told this story: "I'm in IT and people are always coming to me to get reports generated or things changed. I used to take it at face value that they knew what they wanted. Often I'd produce what they wanted, only to find that there had been misunderstandings. Now I use the pinpointing skill to get them to be specific about what they want. It works out better for everyone. They get what they want, faster. I get less stress, more enjoyment from my job and more time."

What if you don't pinpoint?

If you don't pinpoint **when it matters**, then you'll continue to encounter misunderstandings (both yours and other people's), people will not be performing to their potential, stress and conflict will continue.

When you use the skill of pinpointing your misunderstandings will reduce, people will be able to perform closer to their potential, and stress and conflict will decrease. Which situation would you rather have?

So, in summary, pinpointing is vital when:

- People are not doing what they are required to do - performing to or above standard
- The tasks are significant or key
- You want to provide positive reinforcement for people to continue doing what they are doing

Leader's Edge can help you develop the skill of pinpointing.

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