



# How to cascade your messaging: what George Orwell can teach us about HR

By **Raoul Parekh** - 11 June 2015

A piece in *The Guardian* laments [HR's use of the English language](#), and claims that George Orwell would have despaired. It rails against HR's "*abhorrence of anything or anyone deviating from the mean*", and their use of "*language as a sort of low-tech mind control to avert our eyes from office atrocities*". If that wasn't enough to leave the HR reader feeling bruised (and wondering what on earth has been going on at the author's workplace), the comments are even worse – "*They're the evil of banality incarnate*"; "*Most of them appear to be dead-eyed psychopaths*"; "*About time these HR parasites get a bashing*".

Clearly HR doesn't deserve the scorn poured on it by that author and his readers. But the way that HR and employment lawyers use language is worthy of closer consideration. There's a rich genre of dismissal euphemisms – the notorious "rightsizing"; the opaque "RIF" (reduction in force); the neutral-but-ominous "restructuring"; the almost pleasant sounding "counsel out"; the positively marital "separation", and of course the faintly threatening "terminate" – especially scary when it comes time (as one former client once put it) to "pull the trigger on these terminations".

Sometimes use of language is important, and difficult to get right. In difficult situations, it is tempting to shy away from the frankness that can be helpful to the reader, and even beneficial legally. That comes out most clearly in the most difficult HR situations, like grievance decisions, disciplinaries and during performance management. It will almost always be worthwhile to make clear who has made a decision, and on what basis that decision is made, even when doing so can feel a little frightening. In an appraisal, a little truthfulness in highlighting what a manager really thinks about an employee's performance can go a long way in helping to bolster the company's case for a performance dismissal at a later date. When managing a grievance, capability or performance procedure, language that focuses on the processes or policies that apply can feel distant and risks lacking humanity.

Coupling the necessary formalities with effective and sincere communication is difficult, but it's an aim worth pursuing and keeping in mind when dealing with difficult HR situations. Not saying what you mean, or not meaning what you say, is rarely the path to successful relationships with employees or to resolving disputes – even for the dead-eyed psychopaths among us.