



THE BREVITY
MANDATE

JOE McCORMACK

An author once explained the key to his successful novels in brilliant simplicity: “I leave out the parts that people will skip.”

In an attention economy, getting to the point quickly matters more than ever. If you miss the mark and are long winded, you'll lose people and get lost in the shuffle.

Brevity is emerging as a new business basic. In *Brief: Make a Bigger Impact by Saying Less*, I outline why professionals struggle with brevity and how to embrace a “less is more” mentality.

However, brevity is easier said, than done. So, why do so many professionals admit the importance of brevity yet fail to be clear and concise themselves? Could you quickly nominate someone you know to a Brief Hall of Fame?

When it comes to being clear and concise, most people are quick to point the finger that those around them need it, while very few take the blame themselves. Why is this so hard to do?

First, there's so much to say and so many ways to say it—professionals cannot help themselves. The brutal reality surrounds all of us every day: PowerPoint presentations that lack power and have no point; management monologues that feel more like lectures and less like leadership; and executive briefings that are rarely brief.

If you dig deeper, there are seven capital sins of brevity that you consistently commit:

1. **Cowardice.** You hide behind meaningless words and don't have the guts to be clear and take a stand. You wrap your message with mounds of jargon and business buzzwords.
2. **Confidence.** You're a know-it-all and, to everyone's dismay, cannot restrain yourself from explaining every painful detail. You need to show the world you're an expert.
3. **Callousness.** You are selfish and don't respect people's time. When they talk to you, you're impatient and in a rush, but when you have the floor, time seems to stand still.
4. **Comfort.** You get loose with words with your closest collaborators. Familiarity leads to contempt—and lack of brevity. Your double standard means you're succinct with important people, yet long-winded with others.

5. **Confusion.** You choose to think out loud when it is still not clear to you what you're thinking—which is a big mistake. When ideas start germinating, they'll likely be illogical and out of order, indistinct and blurry.
6. **Complication.** You firmly believe that there are some things that are too complicated to be simplified—even though the world values simplicity. You opt to over explain than to boil down an idea.
7. **Carelessness.** You're often verbally sloppy and say everything that's in your mind rather than sharing what's on your mind. Your lack of discipline and a mental filter often get you in trouble.

If you cannot overcome these obstacles, you'll likely miss opportunities and mismanage your business and your career. The unspoken expectation is that successful people today will be masters of brevity. In his classic book *Selling the Invisible*, Harry Beckwith cautions business leaders that are trying to differentiate themselves, “the more you say, the less people hear.”

“In an attention economy, getting to the point quickly matters more than ever. ... Brevity is a new business basic.”

Here are the daunting challenges we all face every day to be heard: Attention spans are in a tailspin. In 2000, the average was 12 seconds and now it's only eight. Professionals are interrupted 6-7 times an hour, often unable to get back to the task at hand. More than 43% abandon complicated or lengthy e-mails in the first 30 seconds. And the majority of people admit ignoring half the e-mails they get every day.

Here are some real-life, painful examples of what happens when brevity is missing:

- **General dismissal.** A field-grade Army officer delivers a brief to his superiors on a recommended strategic course of action with a series of PowerPoint slides. He watches his presentation unravel as a high-ranking general obsessed with details spends the entire time feverishly highlighting every single typographical error on the handout. This officer lost his audience in the minutia.
- **A rising star stalls.** A brilliant young woman who looks like she is right out of Central Casting—bright, talented, and attractive—is widely recognized by senior leadership as the future go-to gal. However, her fatal flaw is well known—she cannot close big deals because she cannot shut up. Her motor mouth bars her from any client-facing assignments.

- **Done deal comes undone.** After closing a \$500,000 contract with a new client, a sales executive is shocked to discover that his over-enthusiastic support person has followed up with the client and explained all the reasons why he thinks they've purchased way more technology than they need. The verbal misstep drops the deal by \$200k.
- **98-pager delivered.** Frantically looking for a simple one-page product summary for a big PR push, a VP of communications discovers that the best her organization can deliver is a mega PowerPoint file with nearly 100 slides, which chokes her email inbox and kills the story.
- **Hero's story overlooked.** A police detective takes the initiative to recognize a fellow officer's generosity and impact with disabled athletes by pitching his feel-good story to a major running magazine. A reporter returns the detective's call but he cannot quickly sum up his pitch and rambles on. The reporter becomes too confused and the story doesn't run.
- **Luncheon leaves a bad taste.** Three hundred busy executives attend a non-profit fundraiser during their busy workweek. The keynote speaker is slotted 20 minutes after the meal. He blows far beyond the allotted time and after nearly an hour, the room is half empty and the feel-good charity loses its appeal.

You get the point. The business world today is full of information overload and there is not enough time to sift through it. If you cannot capture people's attention and deliver your message with brevity, you'll lose them.

For starters, the discipline to capture and manage elusive mindshare now shapes and defines professional success. Shorter e-mails, better organized updates, and tighter and more engaging presentations are immediate indicators that you've got what it takes to succeed in an attention economy.

Getting to the point is a non-negotiable standard. The reasons why are plentiful.

Ten years ago, brevity was a nicety and meant primarily for long-winded types that couldn't shut up. Today, being clear and concise is an absolute necessity; it's what successful people expect to see—and get quickly frustrated when it's missing.

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The mandate goes far beyond knowing the importance of brevity; it means the discipline of doing something about it.

Since raising your awareness isn't enough, here are three things you can do to make an immediate, noticeable shift:

1. **Take more time to prepare.** It takes a concerted effort in advance to be brief. Write down your main point and three key ideas before you walk into your next meeting or jump onto the next conference call.
2. **Respect people's scarce time.** Remember that other people's time is as valuable as your own. When you sense you're getting on a roll, it's time to wrap it up.
3. **Empathize with their inattention.** Be convinced that the people you communicate with are buried and can't handle another ounce. With a deeper sense of understanding, you'll trim information when others go pile on.

Brevity is your professional responsibility. Though it may seem an obvious need, it really is hard work that requires constant vigilance and discipline. **The payoff, however, is worth it when you, your ideas and company clearly and quickly stand apart.** 📌

Info



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR | Joe McCormack is an experienced marketing executive, successful entrepreneur and author. He founded and serves as managing director of The Sheffield Company, an award-winning boutique agency recognized for its focus on narrative messaging and visual storytelling. His new book, *Brief: Make a Bigger Impact by Saying Less* (Wiley & Sons, 2014) tackles the timeliness of the “less is more” mandate. In 2013, he founded [The BRIEF Lab](#) as a specialty institute to help business and military leaders become lean communicators. There are currently facilities in Chicago, IL and Southern Pines, NC.

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