

“Bizeer Gummies”

Diversity is sometimes about counting people.
Inclusion is always about making people count.

—Steve L. Robbins

“So, guys, what would you like for a snack before bedtime?” I asked as my three sons and I drove home one night. Nicholas and Zachary, the two eldest, quickly responded in unison: “Fruit roll-ups!”

“Now, there’s good eating,” I thought. I looked back at Jacob, our two-year-old, who hadn’t yet put in his order. He seemed to be processing an algorithm in deciding what he wanted. “What would you like, Jacob?”

“Umm, umm, umm . . . bizeer gummies.”

“What kind of gummies?” I asked for clarification.

“Bizeer gummies!” he said confidently.

I searched my brain’s toddler-to-adult language translation database. Nothing. What in the heck are bizeer gummies? Maybe I was losing my

hearing. Should have listened when my mom warned me about going to Bee Gees and Andy Gibb concerts.

"Can you say that again, Jacob? What would you like for a snack?"

"Bizeer gummies!" he said again, this time with a look and tone that made me feel like I was the language-challenged person in this dialogue. "I want bizeer gummies."

I have a PhD in communication, yet I was floundering. What could this young alien be talking about? I had encountered other alien forms of communication in the past with my first two sons, but this was a different dialect. "Gummies" I understood. But "bizeer" did not register.

"Say it one more time, Jacob. What would you like for a snack?"

I turned my head to see Jacob scowling at me with eyebrows furrowed. "I WANT BIZEER GUMMIES!"

Still nothing. Just as I was about to throw in the translation towel, a voice piped up from the back of our minivan, "I know what Jacob wants." Speaking with a calmness that belied my true feelings, I asked Nicholas, my eldest son, why he hadn't said something sooner. All I got back was, "I don't know." He's not even a teenager and already he doesn't know things.

"So, what does Jacob want, Nicholas?"

"He wants Buzz Light Year gummies," my son responded nonchalantly, as if to suggest that I had received my PhD by mail order.

"Of course, Buzz Light Year gummies," I said to myself. It made perfect sense. My epiphany came just as we pulled into our driveway.

When I got in the house, I asked my wife if she knew what "bizeer gummies" were, just to reassure myself that other adults also are ignorant about toddler talk. "Of course!" she said with that "how-did-men-come-to-run-the-world?" look. "Bizeer gummies are Buzz Light Year gummies. You would know that if you did more grocery shopping with your sons."

Ouch! Ouch! and Ouch! In a span of ten minutes my youngest son had taught me how frustrating it can be when one is not well understood, and

my dear, loving wife had underscored the fact that to understand others, you must get to know them. And to get to know them, you must take intentional steps to spend time with them.

Who Are Your "Aliens"?

We've all heard it said that you can't understand what you don't know. But how many of us take to heart the fundamental lesson in that statement? To get to know people, you have to interact with them. And by interact, I do not mean exchanging polite, yet insincere, "drive-by" hellos while passing in the hall at work. Real, substantive interaction means taking time to hang out, to communicate, and to learn about one another.

Fundamentally, communication is the process of creating shared meaning and understanding. Even in this age of proliferating electronic communication, there is no substitute for face-to-face contact when developing relationships. The more time we spend with others, the more we tend to learn about them. The more we learn about them, the greater the chance that there will be fewer misunderstandings between us. Strangers become less strange. So, investing time in communicating with others is like taking out an insurance policy against lack of understanding in the future.

It's hard to set aside time for people we don't know. But with the United States becoming more racially and culturally diverse, it is imperative that individuals and organizations that want to be culturally competent take out that insurance policy. The more time we invest, the greater the chance we will learn that we have a lot in common, or that substantive differences are launchpads for greater learning.

When we don't take the time to create shared meaning and understanding, we assure ourselves of future communication problems. Misun-

derstanding and lack of understanding often result in frustration and anger for all parties. It doesn't take a rocket scientist, or even a PhD in communication, to recognize that frustrated and angry people generally are not beneficial to organizations.

It's in the best interest of organizations to encourage an investment in relationship building among their personnel, on and off the clock. And that means relationship building not just between people who feel comfortable with each other, but also between people who don't find a lot in common right away. It's with these "other" people that the potential for lack of understanding and misunderstanding is highest.

This failure in understanding often occurs when there is "noise" in the message transfer. By noise, I mean anything that hinders the receiver from getting the message the sender intended. Noise can be anything from a language barrier to distracting nonverbal signs to having lenses and filters that distort the message. Noise is not necessarily anyone's fault. But we must recognize it as a cause of communication problems, and we must overcome it if we are to achieve effective communication.

A combination of factors contributed to the noise between Jacob and me. One factor was my lack of the correct filter to decipher the word *bizeer*. Another was my son's way of pronouncing words, which did not fit my method and style of oral communication. Neither Jacob nor I can do much to muffle these types of noise. So I am left with only one course of action if I want to fix the noise problem immediately: I need to spend more time with Jacob, to get to know him and his method of communication better.

It's really just that simple to overcome "understanding" problems with others who may communicate or act a little differently from the way we do. Yep, that's right, we need to allocate more time to getting to know others. By building relationships, we will foster an environment in which creating shared meaning is more possible and reaching mutual understanding is more likely.

So take out that insurance policy and get to know others with whom you rarely spend time. But remember, insurance policies mature over time with regular payments. In the same way, relationships are built over time, with regular and frequent payments of attention. It's hard work that often yields lasting benefits.